

# **A Determined Bride for the Struggling Widower**

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A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

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An Orphaned Rancher For A Hopeful Bride

## Chapter 1

## **Copyright**

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The clock in the Tennerson house struck six o'clock, clanging loudly enough to give Celia a headache.

She set her fork down and closed her eyes. Tears were already streaming down her cheeks and being reminded of the passing of time wasn't helping.

Nothing helped her. Food, water, blankets, all of it. She didn't want a part of anything in this world around her.

Being at her parents' home should have brought her some level of comfort. This was where she had grown up.

There were dozens of wonderful memories in this cozy home on the outskirts of Boston.

After her husband, Richard Anderson, lost his job last year, they had moved in with her parents to save up their money. She had taken a job in a bookshop around that time but had quit when she became pregnant in the hopes of taking better care of this small human.

She had done so much to try and keep that baby alive inside of her

for months. This meant special meals and herbs and medicines. She'd stopped taking long walks and spent hours just lying there with a prayer in her heart that the baby might live.

But he didn't.

The tears continued streaming down her cheeks, splashing onto her plate and pooling around the food she couldn't bring herself to eat. Just thinking about eating nauseated her.

"Dear?" Her mother leaned over to put a gentle hand on her shoulder with a light squeeze. "Celia, please. You need to eat something."

Her curly hair bounced on her shoulders; that had always brought Celia joy.

At least, it used to.

She nodded vaguely to her mother before looking down at her plate.

Potatoes and roast beef and carrots. This had been one of her favorite dishes when she was growing up. The food was a comfortable treat to her whenever she was sad or frustrated or upset.

But now, just looking at her plate made her head spin.

Celia glanced up at the empty chair across from her and then pushed the plate away. "I'll eat in the morning, I think. I don't feel well." She hardly spoke above a whisper.

She didn't have to look up to know that her parents, seated on

either side of her at the square table, were exchanging glances. They were worried about her and she supposed they had the right.

While she wanted to have the courage to speak up and tell them that she would eventually be fine, she was having a hard time convincing herself of this truth.

Her shaking hands tenderly moved over her swollen abdomen. It was still larger than usual even three weeks after the incident.

There was no other name for what happened. It wasn't just a birth, after all. It was when everything had gone wrong.

The tears kept trickling down her cheeks. She had given up on trying to wipe them away a long time ago.

“Celia?” Her father spoke up now in a tender tone. “Just a few bites. You haven't eaten anything today.”

Feeling her throat constrict, she balled her hands into fists. How could they not understand the agony that ripped through her very soul?

Days might have passed, but it didn't make the pain go away. Nothing, it seemed, could make the pain go away.

Perhaps if this had been the first stillbirth that she had suffered through, the situation might have been a little more bearable. But it wasn't.

Beyond her countless miscarriages, this was the second stillbirth child that she had spent hours trying to bring into this world.

It was a cruel world they lived in.



The problem with pain was that she couldn't seem to escape it. She slept for hours every day, which made it hard for her to sleep at night.

Too many times, she had woken up with dried tears on her cheeks. Everything reminded her of the baby she had almost born, such as the extra weight around her stomach.

*"I'm sorry,"* the midwife had told her that evening.

Celia remembered the sweat on her forehead and the blood in the buckets. She had hardly been able to breathe. Her mother had been holding her hand as they'd looked forward to seeing her baby.

Though born four months early, she had been hopeful. She had prayed to the Lord for so long to have a child.

But when her midwife gave her that apology in that too-quiet room, Celia had known the worst had come true once more.

The baby, a little boy she would have named William after her father, was too young. He was much too premature and his body hadn't even formed like it should have.

He'd had a cleft palate and a club foot. Though her husband had refused to look at the baby, Celia had spent hours rocking the child while praying for a miracle.

It never came.

"Maybe we should give you something strong to help you sleep," her mother suggested at the table. Her voice pulled Celia back into the moment.

“You could use some rest. I could draw you a nice, warm bath, like you used to love when you were a little girl.”

A lump formed in her throat. “Thank you, but I think I’ll just go to sleep now. Good night.”

They didn’t stop her as she moved away from the table and started up the stairs. Celia went to the room she shared with her husband, where she changed before falling into the blankets.

She stared at the ceiling for a long time, wondering why this had to happen to her. She was twenty-nine years old and had been married for six years. Was she cursed?

Why wasn’t the Lord letting her be the mother she had always dreamed of becoming?

“Celia?”

Her eyes opened and quickly adjusted to the darkness. Sitting up, she watched Richard walk into the room.

“Where have you been? You were gone all day.”

Ruffling his hair, he shrugged. His shirt came off and then he climbed into bed.

“I was out. And I was thinking. We waited a year after that first stillbirth, remember? I think we waited too long. We need to have children, Celia.

“I need to have a child to carry on my family name. We should start trying again. Maybe not tonight, if you’re tired. We can wait until tomorrow. But you’re getting older, and—”

She cut him off when he started to get louder and more excited. “No.”

Her husband paused. “No?”

When Richard reached out to her, she shook her head. “I can’t keep doing this. It hurts too much, don’t you understand? I want children, but this is killing me.”

For once she was glad of the darkness so she couldn’t see the expression on his face. Whether he was mad or disappointed, she wasn’t certain.

Nor did it matter, because she had already made up her mind. It was clear her body would never be able to bring forth a child no matter how much she wanted one.

Knowing she couldn’t go through this pain again, Celia knew she had to accept this truth.

“But that’s ridiculous,” Richard tried to argue. “You want children, I know you do. Why would you be so selfish?”

A lump formed in her throat. Turning away, Celia laid back down with a heavy sigh. He didn’t understand, but perhaps with time he would.

“I’m sorry, Richard. I mean it. Good night.”

She closed her eyes and tried to get some sleep. From what she could tell, her husband was having a hard time resting, as well.

They both tossed and turned throughout the night. Yet they did their best not to touch one another. Richard smelled of smoke and

tobacco, pungent smells that made her nose itch.

She eventually fell asleep to slip into the darkness for several hours. She hadn't realized how deeply she slept until she woke up the next morning to find that Richard was gone.

He usually slept longer than she did, so it surprised Celia.

As she pulled the blankets closer around her for comfort, supposing he must have gone to get a drink, she heard a rustle within the sheets.

Reaching under the blankets, she pulled out a small pile of papers.

The words were blurry to her sleep-deprived eyes, but Celia managed to make out the words. The one that caught her attention was 'divorce.'

Suddenly awake, she sat up and rubbed her eyes to read. She looked over the pages in disbelief as she began to realize what was going on. Richard hadn't just left the bedroom—he had left her.

The grief she was going through began to take on another sense. She read through the pages with a pounding headache. Richard had already signed.

It was a simple process. All she had to do was sign her name and take it to the courthouse.

Celia staggered out of bed. Not knowing what else to do, she managed to put on some clothes and then stumbled out of the house.

Her shoes didn't match and she wore her robe over her dress, but

she didn't particularly care.

"How can we help you?" the woman at the counter asked when Celia arrived at the courthouse.

Looking around, Celia gulped and then showed her the papers. "Is Richard here?"

The woman, thin with a hooked nose and round glasses, peered at her strangely. "Richard? Who's that? I don't think so.

"Honey, all you have to do is sign your name here and then it's over. I can't take it until then. Here's a pen."

She had come to the courthouse to find Richard, not knowing where else to look for him. Where had he gone?

Sleep-deprived and confused, Celia obeyed without thinking. She signed her name and then watched as the woman made a note in a book and then wrote up a small piece of paper.

"Here you are, a receipt for your divorce papers. If you ever want to come back and look at them, just bring this paper with you," the woman explained.

Celia accepted it and walked home in a daze. Her heart pounded in her ribcage; her stomach churned.

She stumbled back to her parents' house, where they wrapped her up in blankets and gave her coffee to warm her up.

"We're divorced," she managed to stammer. "He's gone."

It took the rest of the day for the strange sensation to fade away. Forcing herself to eat a few bites at supper, she explained the little she knew.

Her parents looked at each other before leaning forward to touch her shoulders and hair.

“I’m sorry,” her mother whispered sympathetically. “But perhaps this is for the best? I’m sure he’s trying to help you. Now, you can move forward with your life.

“Don’t you think? You will stay here and we will find something for you to do. It’s going to be wonderful. You can forget all about Richard and—and everything else.”

She didn’t say the children, but that was all Celia could think about.

Though she appreciated her mother, the woman didn’t understand the pain she was going through. After all, her mother had ended up having eight other children besides Celia.

The house had been filled with noise and laughter and games while she was growing up.

Life had all been so simple back then.

Celia stared at her plate as she willed herself not to cry.

She was alone now, more alone than she had been in a long time, and the crying would do no good. The last pieces in her life were falling apart.

All she had ever wanted was a family of her own. It was the one

thing she had always been hopeful to have and yet it was also the one thing that the Lord wouldn't give to her.

"Child?" her father asked her tentatively. "How do you like the cabbage?"

His use of the name hit Celia hard as she thought of the children she could have had and no longer could. An overwhelming sense of sadness poured into her soul, making her forget any desire for eating.

Standing up, she shook her head. "I'm tired."

They let her go. Though they were supportive and loving, they didn't understand.

No one understood her pain. This reminder hit Celia on a regular basis.

She collapsed into bed feeling alone and miserable.

Closing her eyes, she wondered if she was meant to be unhappy for the rest of her life.

**T**he sizzling caught Brent's attention.

Picking up his spatula, he quickly turned the eggs around on the skillet over the fire. He didn't want to burn their breakfast.

He liked to believe himself a good cook, but there were days where he just couldn't seem to focus.

No, it was more the fact that there was too much to do.

"I want to use that fork!"

"It's mine! That one is yours."

"Don't push me, Mary. Papa, Mary pushed me!"

Brent didn't bother to look over his shoulder; this sort of behavior happened most mornings when he was late getting them their food.

It wasn't a particularly big kitchen. They had everything they needed, but everything still had a way of going wrong.



After two years like this, he'd have thought he would have found a rhythm for everyone, including himself, to have formed, but it seemed he was wrong.

He paused to rub his eyes with a groan. The voices ringing out behind him were white noise as he tried to make sure the simple breakfast could be prepared quickly.

Yet, he could already smell something burning.

"What have I done now?" he whispered with a soft scowl.

He fiddled around with the pans in an attempt to figure out what he was ruining this time. The eggs were still runny so he didn't know how that was possible.

Then he had the cabbage and the potatoes. It wasn't much of a breakfast, he knew, but it certainly kept them alive.

The longer it took to prepare breakfast meant the later the children would be out of the house and he would be out on the ranch, working.

Though he liked to tell himself that everything would work out no matter what, there were mornings like this one where he didn't feel so confident.

He still had to go back to the barn to milk one of the cows that he had forgotten about. Then he needed to tend to the garden since it had been a week.

And that wasn't even including his daily work out on the ranch.

How was it that he was always running out of time?

“Papa! Papa, look!”

“I—what?”

Turning around to see what was going on with his children, Brent’s heart skipped a beat when he didn’t find Mary there. She was the one who had spoken up to grab his attention.

His eyes scanned the room before finding her by the back door. She was pointing out the window into their pasture.

“Look, Papa! The sheep are out!”

“What?” he asked, not sure that he had heard right.

The other children hurried over with loud gasps. Brent immediately forgot about breakfast when he looked out to see that his ten-year-old daughter was correct.

The spatula was tossed onto the table before he scurried around the children to rush outside.

Squinting in the sunlight, Brent ran over to the pen where the sheep were supposed to live. He had eleven of them and only one of them was still there, drinking from the water bucket.

But that hardly mattered. Ten white sheep were bounding around and enjoying their freedom.

He groaned in frustration as he started after the first animal. This one was the smallest and it was grazing by a tree.

But the moment he reached out, the sheep bleated and then dashed off to the left.

All he captured was thin air.

“Come on,” Brent growled, hurrying after the creature.

Rushing around in frustration, he tried to wrangle the sheep before they could get too far. It was a chilly day and yet he was soon sweating from the exertion.

He managed to get three of the sheep in quite easily since they hadn’t gone too far.

“There’s one over there!” piped the small voice of his son.

He glanced over to see where the child was gesturing. There was one sheep starting around the corner of the house. Brent quickly moved in that direction.

This was the smallest sheep and as it began to munch on the dead flowers, Brent lifted the animal off its feet and carefully set it back down in the pen.

He double-checked the lock before moving onto another beneath their old apple tree.

The sheep might have been half his size, if not smaller, but they were fast and clever and eager for their independence.

Brent was losing his patience, especially with the children trying to tell him what to do.

“No, over there, Papa!”

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he glanced back at the four of them. “Thank you, but please go back inside. Now, kids. I’ll be

there in a minute, all right?”

“I want to help,” Mary spouted eagerly and started over to him.

The moment she arrived, Brent steered her back toward the house by the shoulders. “Thank you, but no. Back inside, Mary.”

She groaned and pouted before letting her older sister tug her back through the door. They disappeared, letting him focus on his task at hand.

Trying to concentrate, Brent turned back to the sheep. He was at least grateful that it wasn’t snowing yet.

They’d had frost the other morning, but surely there would be a few more days or even a few weeks until the snow was there to stay. The grass was easier to run in than snow.

While he knew the children were eager for the falling snow, he much preferred springtime and summer.

It took him several more minutes to track down the sheep. He snatched them up one by one in his attempt to finally corral them together. But, at long last, they were all back in their pen.

Before returning inside, he again checked the latch. It was locked. He was set to go, and those sheep were not getting out again.

He shook his head and sighed heavily on his way back to the house. Once he was inside, he paused and realized that he was still only wearing his socks. He had left his shoes behind.

His socks were soaked from the damp grass and they were tracking in mud on the rug. Frowning, he pulled them off and left them in a

pile.

“I’ll deal with that later,” he told himself.

He inhaled deeply before turning to face everyone in the kitchen.

The six-year-old twins, Liam and Lily, were kneeling on their chairs with tender expressions on their faces. Mary was at the back of the table.

She was the one who looked most like their mother, with lighter hair. But there was a dark scowl on her face now as she stared at him with his arms crossed.

And finally, his twelve-year-old Penelope was to the side by the stove. She crept closer with something in her hands. The shyest of them all, his eldest tentatively came over to show him her plate.

Only then did Brent smell the scent of something burnt in the air.

That was what his daughter carried on the plate. The remnants of the eggs were there on the plate, all black and brown. His heartbeat slowed as he stared at the mess in dismay.

“I tried to get it out before it burnt,” Penelope started to tell him. “But...”

He swallowed. “I know. I know. I’m sorry, Penelope.”

Crouching down, he set the plate down and hugged her. Seeing Mary still pouting at him, he reached out to ruffle her hair.

“What are we going to do about breakfast?” she grumbled and moved away so he couldn’t touch her. “Are we going to eat

anything or not?”

“I’m really hungry,” Lily pouted. He could hear the wobbling chin in her voice.

When she spoke again, the baby of the family, she was tearing up. “I’m hungry! I want to eat food. Why can’t we eat food?”

Immediately, her twin brother began to cry along with her.

Their voices began to grow louder in the otherwise quiet home. The noise echoed off the ceiling as Brent climbed back onto his feet.

He patted Penelope’s cheek and pulled out a chair for her before taking the plate with the ruined eggs. “We will eat,” he reassured them. “I just need a few more minutes.”

The twins continued crying. Brent hesitated, standing there for a minute.

He wanted to scoop up the children in his arms to comfort them. But what good would that do if he then couldn’t make breakfast?

He was torn between making these decisions. It was a tiring process and it never grew any easier. Constantly overwhelmed, he reminded himself to keep his feelings at bay.

There was no time for him to feel anything when his children needed him. And they *always* needed him. He offered a few sympathetic words before turning back to the stove.

Besides, it was better if the children didn’t see his face sometimes.

Swallowing hard, Brent rubbed his eyes and then cleaned up his mess so that he could start anew. They all needed food to get moving for the day.

He forced himself to pay attention while he tried to figure out what to make for everyone.

Bread. They still had some bread. Maybe he could do something with that.

He got to work, trying to scrounge up some beans, as well. His thoughts wandered while he did his best to cook something for his family.

He wondered if he would be better at this in another couple of years.

His wife, Nicole, had passed away just over two years ago.

Wasn't this life supposed to get easier as time went on? That was what Brent had thought, but now he wasn't so certain. In many ways, it was only getting harder.

There was so much to do. He was trying to make the ranch thrive and he had been close to accomplishing this when his wife died. Now, they made just enough to live off on.

Trying to balance taking care of his kids and the ranch continued to grow harder for him. It felt as though he was drowning without Nicole.

A lump formed in his throat as he dumped some food on the table.

It wasn't much—three slightly bruised apples with bread and some

leftover jam. He had two potatoes cooking again, but that would take a while. Not exactly a feast, and not very promising.

All four children turned to look at him before grudgingly eating.

He sighed, slumping in his seat. They were all just barely surviving and everyone knew it. Running a hand through his hair, Brent knew he needed to do more.

His children all deserved better. They needed parents who could care for them. A father to protect them and a mother to nurture them.

Lately, he couldn't seem to do any of that. All he was now was a failure.



**L**ooking up into the sun, Brent scrunched his nose in distaste.

It was early October and yet he was sweating twice as much as he had been that morning when he was retrieving their sheep. The sun was shining brightly down on him in the middle of the afternoon.

He was parched.

Their morning in the house had been a busy mess, so he hadn't filled a second canteen like he usually did. After sending the children down the road to school, he had headed out into the fields to move the cattle into the northwest pasture.

He used to have hired help on his ranch. When things were going well, he had been in the middle of hiring a third man to manage the cattle and tend the horses.

But everything fell apart when Nicole passed away. The cattle had fallen sick and, after losing half his herd, Brent had to let the men go to find some other place to work.

Though he dearly needed the assistance, there weren't enough

funds for something like that. It would be just him until they could bring in enough to hire someone.

Looking away from the sun, Brent fixed the hat on his head.

He turned back to his horse after spotting some broken wire on the fence. Something was always falling apart somewhere.

Grabbing his gloves from his pocket, he opened his saddle bags to search for the spool of wire he always kept on hand.

“Papa?”

It was Penelope, making her way carefully through the tall grass. She glanced up at him and then lifted her skirts so she wouldn’t trip.

His shoulders relaxed as he watched the young girl with her black hair and green eyes. Nicole had always said that she was the spitting image of him. The only real difference was that his daughter’s hair was straight while his was curly.

“Penelope.” He shifted the wiring in his hands as he turned to her. “What are you doing out here? School’s over already?”

Though he trusted her to tend the children at all times, he liked being able to walk them to school in the mornings. There just wasn’t time for him to go pick them up as well.

Luckily, Penelope was responsible and always ensured they returned safely. He just hadn’t realized it was so late.

Penelope hopped over to him with that shy smile of hers. Once she was close enough, she offered up a water canteen that he hadn’t

noticed.

“It was on the kitchen table. I thought you might need it,” she explained in her soft-spoken voice.

Just like it had in the first moment he had seen her, Brent felt his heart grow tender. She was a sweet little thing, an old soul who was always calm and careful and kind.

Brent greatly appreciated all she did. Knowing he had a little bit of help kept him from completely falling apart. It worried him sometimes that she was doing too much to help out.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he told her kindly.

Accepting the canteen, he eagerly drank until he had drained half of it. Water droplets slid down his chin before dropping onto his shirt.

The water wasn’t cold but it wasn’t hot, either. It brought him some relief that he had dearly needed.

He offered it to her. While his daughter took a drink, he glanced toward the house and hoped the other children were behaving themselves.

Everyone was old enough now to know better when it came to dangerous things like the fireplace and the stove. But a father never stopped worrying.

“How was school?” Brent asked when she was done with the water.

Sidling up close to watch him work, Penelope shrugged. “It was all

right. Mary had a hard time paying attention. I think we all did today.”

He swallowed hard, pausing for a moment before slipping his gloves back on. It was hard not to grit his teeth and find a way to change the subject.

His heartbeat slowed but he didn't know how to handle this. Some things were never easy.

“Oh?” Brent tried to keep his voice light. “Too distracted by the heat? It's rather unprecedented, I'd say.”

Though he had hoped she would be amused by his use of one of her favorite words from last year, that didn't quite do the trick for her.

Penelope sighed. “It wasn't the weather. It's the anniversary, you know.”

This was exactly what he had been trying to avoid.

He wavered. Eyes closing, Brent attempted to ignore the tightness in his stomach, like he had been trying to do ever since he woke up that morning.

He had awoken before the roosters and everyone else, knowing exactly what this day meant to his family.

It had been an accident. A terrible, painful accident that had left them all reeling.

The weeks that followed her death were a blur. He had no idea how they had all survived.

He vaguely recalled people bringing them dishes and the pastor stopping by to check in on them, but nothing else beyond clutching his children in fear of losing them, as well.

Brent started working up the courage to look over at Penelope. In the meantime, he spoke up.

“Yes. Yes, I know. It’s been exactly two years now. I thought it might make everyone feel better if I didn’t say anything.”

Taking a moment to respond, she shrugged and studied his handiwork.

“I don’t think so,” Penelope responded at last. “The scriptures say that death isn’t forever, right? If there is a heaven, then we will see her again.

“I don’t think Mother would like to see us so sad. Remember when you said I needed to face my fear of frogs? I think we need to do that with today, too.”

She really was an intelligent young lady.

Pausing, he looked down at her for a long moment. Something deep inside him seemed to say that he needed to listen.

“Maybe so,” he said at last. He had learned over the years that parenting was more about what the children wanted than what he did. “Do you... want to talk about her?”

The young girl hesitated and looked around before she gave a single, jerky nod. Though she appeared anxious, there was that stubborn set to her lips that said she was trying to do her very best.

“I miss her cooking. Not just because it tasted good, but because she always sang when she was in the kitchen,” Penelope said. “No one sings anymore.”

He ruffled her hair. “I know what you mean. And, hey, I would if I could.

“Do you know what I miss most about your mother? Her hugs. They felt like a grizzly bear and a warm blanket all at once.”

While he worked on the fence, he continued this quiet conversation with his daughter. She teared up but kept talking.

Brent was surprised at how much she had to say, but he let her get it all out. And when he was putting his tools away, he pulled out his handkerchief so she could wipe her cheeks dry.

“Papa?” Penelope bit her lip after sniffing. “Do you ever think about, well, getting married again?”

He nearly dropped the handkerchief she had just returned.

The question had caught him off-guard, but he supposed after a second that she would be the one to ask about something like this out of all four children.

The surprise lingered for a minute before he could think of something to say to her.

Scratching his chin, Brent replied slowly, “I guess it would be nice to have help in the house. To have someone who could cook better than myself would be handy.

“And it would be handy if someone was there to help with

everyone's hair."

A watery smile reached his daughter's lips.

As the only one with straight hair, she was the only one to ever appear half-decent at church. The other three always had tangles and knots no matter what he did to handle the situation.

"That's true," Penelope said with a nod. "If you did, you could find someone who liked to sing while they cooked, too."

Nodding, Brent ruffled her hair. "Indeed, I could. But it's not something I've thought about. Maybe later, all right? Let's focus on what we have and what we can do in the meantime."

The conversation changed to lighter topics before they started back to the house at last. He prepared cabbage soup for everyone and read the scriptures and some fairy tales to the children before sending them all to bed after dark.

Once the children were asleep, Brent sorted through the papers at his desk in the front room. Penelope had picked up the mail as well as the newspaper that day.

He studied them thoughtfully before noticing a slip of paper that fell out of the latter.

"A mail-order bride?" he murmured upon reading the ad.

This was a crazy notion. His eyes scanned the page a second time as he tried to imagine people actually choosing to marry strangers. It was odd. And yet he could see why it seemed like a good idea.

Considering his earlier conversation with his daughter, Brent

wondered if this was supposed to be a sign to him. He spent a good hour staring at the ads to try and make up his mind.

He even stood up and tried to walk away, but then came right back and picked up his pen.

“I must be crazy,” he muttered once he had penned his own ad.

Crazy for doing this and crazy for thinking it might work.

His anxiety grew as he reread his scribbles. He knew he needed to be honest, but laying out the fact that he needed help taking care of four children didn’t seem to be an attractive offering.

Did he have anything to offer besides a daunting challenge?

Brent ran his hands through his hair in frustration, knowing he didn’t. He was barely hanging on at the moment and needed some real help.

“I can barely do this and I’m their father,” he muttered with a groan. “How could anyone else help out?”

No one answered his question. He was all alone, just like he had been for the last two painful years.

The heartache would always be with him. The thought of remarrying hadn’t crossed his mind, not really.

He had expected to spend the rest of his life with Nicole. Part of him worried he would be betraying her by marrying someone else.

And yet, what else could he do?



He wasn't the only one struggling in the house. Even if he didn't need a wife, the children needed a mother.

They all needed someone to help them out. This truth was laid bare for Brent and he couldn't ignore it.

Something had to be done.

Sighing, he nodded to himself and carefully set the piece of paper back down. There was no more time to just sit around and hope for things to get better on their own.

It was time he took action and did something.

So he would. He promised himself he would place his ad the very next morning.

Celia paused on the staircase, by the stained glass window.

When she was little, she used to sit right there and let the colorful sunlight warm her up. It had always made her happy to feel as though she was wrapped up in a rainbow.

She had felt special and cheerful, the light always cheering her up.

But not anymore.

If it *had* been special when she was young, the magic must have since faded away.

Sighing, she shook her head. Perhaps it was time she stopped trying to live so much in the past.

Maybe it hurt less. But it wasn't real, and all that it really did was give her a moment of respite before the pain came back to her.

Celia supposed she was making progress—she no longer cried herself to sleep every night.

It had been three weeks since Richard had instigated their divorce

and six weeks since her second stillborn child. The days were passing her by slowly but surely.

Footsteps in the hall caught her attention, and a moment later, her mother appeared below.

“There you are, Celia. And you found the duster? Thank goodness, The front room is such a mess. How about I trade you? There’s a letter from Hattie that just arrived.”

She nodded and reached the bottom of the stairs to complete the trade. Though she had gone up and found the duster in their attic, she supposed she had taken her time coming back downstairs to help with that morning’s chores.

Accepting the letter, she followed her mother slowly to the front room to read the letter.

It was a short one, which was surprising for her younger sister. Hattie was the baby of the family and had lived a golden life.

She had hardly cried as an infant and never had reason to as an adult since marrying a rich German who had settled in upstate New York.

They were planning a trip to Canada so she could learn to ski, it seemed. Then, they were off to Europe for the holidays.

“She sounds happy,” Celia mumbled in a hollow voice when she was done.

Her mother glanced over while she gingerly folded the letter back up. “That is Hattie’s way, of course. Lucky girl, with all of her adventures.

“I cannot imagine doing any of that, especially as a mother. I wonder what little Henry thinks. I—oh dear. I didn’t mean to bring anything up.”

The woman hurried over to her side. Offering a lifeless shrug, Cecilia kept her gaze down.

“It’s fine. You know I’m happy for her and her family. Everyone deserves that, don’t they?”

“Well, yes,” her mother responded slowly. “And you do, too, you know. Are you feeling better? You’re still quieter than usual.

“But at least the divorce is settled and that chapter of your life is over. Surely now everything is looking up?”

Celia bit her tongue to stop from bursting into tears. She told herself that she was stronger than this. Sniffing, she shrugged and then tried to rein her emotions in.

Her mother meant well. The woman hardly knew what she was saying or what it meant. There was no one who understood this pain.

She talked to try and distract herself from the potential tears.

“I don’t know how it’s looking up, Mother. I wanted to be married, remember? I didn’t ask for the divorce.

“Richard didn’t either, not really. He didn’t give me a chance to... I don’t know. He just didn’t.”

Her mother nodded along with a serious expression on her face. She brushed her graying hair from her face with a slight frown.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She didn’t seem to know what else could be said.

Sighing, Celia managed a small shrug. “I always wanted what you gave to all of us: a family.

“I want a husband, Mother. I want a man who loves me and I want us to have children and I want a nice, peaceful life.”

“You deserve that,” her mother responded eagerly. “You do, Celia.”

Part of her wanted to pull away. But she forced herself not to.

Closing her eyes, she merely shook her head. “Do I? If I deserve that, any of that, then why don’t I have it? I don’t have the life that I want. I lost the little that I had.

“I feel like I’m cursed. Why is this happening to me?”

A tear escaped down her cheek.

Celia hurriedly swiped at it, rubbing it away while foolishly hoping her mother hadn’t noticed. All she did was cry and it was wearing everyone down.

Though her parents said nothing of the matter, she could tell this was the case from their forced cheerfulness and urging for her to focus on the bright side of life.

If there was a bright side.

Sighing, her mother reached over to give her a quick, tight hug. She had a rather bony body but her hugs were always worth it. After a quick kiss on the cheek, they pulled apart.

“I know you want that,” her mother said in a sober manner. “It is what most women want. It’s a wonderful thing and a joy to experience.

“But no matter what happens, there is always pain along the way. Celia, dear, this doesn’t have to be the end for you. Your father and I support you in whatever happens next.”

“But I don’t know what to do,” she whispered.

Wisdom was supposed to come with age. Everyone said she would understand more when she grew older. Yet with every passing year, she felt a little more confused.

She might have been twenty-nine years old, but she felt as though she were only nine and was clinging to her mother’s skirts in the middle of the busy town square so she didn’t get lost.

It was too late for that; she was lost and she didn’t know what to do. All she knew was that she wanted to cry.

Studying her thoughtfully, her mother gave a short nod. “I know. Life doesn’t bring you all the answers right away. Just don’t let yourself get carried away with what everyone else is doing.

“We each have our own path to lead. Such as when it comes to children.”

It felt as though the woman spoke in riddles.

“They don’t appear out of thin air,” Celia reminded her.

“I know. Just like I know you want them for yourself,” her mother said with a pointed look. “You were always a little caretaker, even

though you were one of the youngest.

“A child doesn’t need to come from your womb for you to be a mother. There are plenty of children out there needing a mother, just like there are plenty of widowed men needing wives.

“This isn’t the end for you.”

Celia stood there as her mother touched her shoulder and then stepped away.

She hadn’t thought of that before. Relaxing slightly, she pondered the idea that she didn’t need to start over in the manner she’d thought she would have to.

It was true, what her mother said. There were men who no longer had wives and wouldn’t want to spend the rest of their lives alone without companionship.

As for children, she knew of two orphanages around town. She had lost track of the times she had given pennies to the little beggars, who were often terribly young.

Her heart ached to be able to wrap her arms around someone.

After having been married for six years, Celia hardly knew how to be single again. If she wanted to find herself a widower, what did she have to do to get there?

She supposed it was too early to try yet. But maybe she could start putting together a plan for when she felt ready to invest in her future again.

There had to be someone or something out there that could help

her.

Maybe her mother was right, after all. She could have that life she had always wanted, that family she had dreamed about.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't realize her mother had returned until the woman gently touched her shoulder. Jumping, Celia turned around with wide eyes.

Before she could say anything about what was on her mind now, her mother offered her something.

It was the newspaper.

"What is that for?" she asked in confusion.

Her mother wordlessly opened it up to reveal something tucked away inside. It was a short pamphlet with curly letters and a few sketches.

Across the top was written *Mail-Order Bride Catalog*.

"A what?"

"The West is filled with men who need families, while most of the women are here in the east. It seems that friendships can be built through letters and marriages can come out of it.

"I saw this some time ago, and I thought it might be to your liking. While I don't want you to go where I cannot follow, well, I would rather ensure your happiness above all," her mother explained slowly.

Celia gripped the booklet tightly. All sorts of stories flooded



through her mind when she considered the wilderness. “West? Beyond Philadelphia, even? I don’t know about that.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. It’s just a catalog,” her mother reminded her. She offered a smile and a shrug before turning to continue dusting the window sills.

While Celia meant to follow after her, she only managed one step before her eyes returned to the booklet in her hands. It seemed much too thin to carry such promise.

Pursing her lips, she managed to gather up the courage to look inside.

Just one look, she told herself.

And yet, to her surprise, the very first ad promised everything she was looking for.

Celia nearly stopped breathing as she pored over the words in disbelief. This was a man all the way out in California, a rancher who was looking to support his family.

He had prepared an ad to find a kind and patient woman who could act as a mother to his children. There were four of them.

That would be a good-sized family. Not the nine children like her family, but four would do beautifully. And he sounded like a good man, from the little he had written.

She studied his words over and over again as her interest grew.

Sparks of hope were lit within her for the first time in a long while.

Celia resolved right then and there that she would write to this man, Brent Calloway. She would try not to expect anything from it at the moment, but she couldn't resist this opportunity.

Not when this could help her and help that poor family.

Maybe she didn't need to give up on her dreams of a husband and children, after all.

A lump formed in his throat at Brent studied the small handkerchiefs before him.

There were four, made of soft linen. All of them were a creamy-white and had been handcrafted for each of his children.

In the corners were the initials of their names in order to tell them apart. Penelope had purple thread, Mary had red, Lily had yellow, and Liam had blue.

He rubbed his thumb gently over the handiwork.

They were lovely little gifts. All of them had been sent forward in a small package that included a larger one with green threading for himself, as well.

But, like that one, they all stayed safely stowed away in the large chest at the end of the bed.

Brent studied them thoughtfully for another long moment in the candlelight before gently tucking the cloth away.

Although they had been Christmas gifts for him and his family, he

hadn't told anyone about them. The children didn't know about the handkerchiefs he kept hidden away.

He didn't know what to do about it.

If he gave these gifts to his children, then they would ask where the handkerchiefs had come from and who knew them well enough to have used their favorite colors.

When they asked him that question, he would be forced to explain to them about Celia.

He had never really anticipated anyone answering his ad.

However, the young woman had sent him a letter and he had felt compelled to respond to her. They soon had developed a fairly regular correspondence that continued through the winter as the spring began to come about.

Everything about this situation continued to surprise Brent. He hadn't expected her to keep writing back, but she always did.

Learning to look forward to her letters, he had appreciated the perfect distraction of her sweet words.

But life continued to be hard. His cattle had started to grow stronger, but then it was his hay crop that began to be a problem for the ranch.

There was a rather persistent drought that hadn't helped anyone. The little moisture collected during the cold weather hadn't done them much good.

Everyone prayed for the rain; May came and they'd had hardly a

drop from the skies.

Once the handkerchiefs were placed back in the chest, he picked up the bundle of letters.

Though Celia swore she didn't wear perfume, a sweet floral scent always seemed to linger on those envelopes.

He had never been one to keep letters. But now, he couldn't bear to part with them.

It was incredible what he could learn about a person from their words. The woman he wrote to was clearly eloquent, kind, and cared deeply for the four children whom she had never even met.

All of her letters were longer than his, for she was always asking him questions and telling him about her dreams for the future.

Before hearing from her, Brent had worried he would struggle to stay afloat in this life for the rest of his days. But she gave him hope in a way he had not known was possible.

There was something splendid about this woman. He hesitated to call it love, yet he didn't have any other words for what he felt toward her.

They had never seen each other face to face. Though she had given him a description of herself—one that he had memorized some months ago—he wasn't certain how he could feel such strong emotions toward her.

All Brent knew was that she had quickly become an important part of his life.

His only concern now was about telling the children.

When he'd first started writing to her, he had assumed it wouldn't work out and they would soon forget the matter. He hadn't wanted to get his hopes up.

Why make up something in his head when it most likely wouldn't turn into anything beyond a few letters?

But those doubts were beginning to quiet down now.

All of them, except for the part where he had to tell his children. He wanted to bring Celia there, but he feared the worst with the kids.

How would they respond? He had no clue. There was no way to know until he actually told them the news.

He had tried to do this on Christmas morning. Everyone had been doing their best to enjoy themselves. He had only burned half the popped corn that they all ate to break their morning fast.

Clearing his throat, he'd told them he had an announcement. All four children had turned to look at him curiously.

It had been the perfect opportunity. He had those delicate handkerchiefs in his back pocket.

But, in that moment, he'd lost his confidence and changed his mind. He told them they would have a snowman-building contest after eating.

Brent walked out of his bedroom with a sigh. That room always seemed too quiet these days.

Ruffling his hair, he walked down the hall to check on his children. There were two rooms for them. The older girls shared one and the twins were in the other.

He remembered talking to Nicole once about building another room for Liam to have to himself as he grew older, but there hadn't been time to make it happen.

It was late and a waning moon was hanging clearly in the night sky. He glanced out the window before pausing by the twins' bedroom.

Whispers crept from beneath the door.

"And then the pony went up the mountain and ate all the grass," Lily told her brother happily. "And all of his friends came over to play."

"What then?" Liam asked. "Did they play games? What games did they play? Did they chase each other? That's my favorite."

Brent's lip twitched. The two of them were so close and very connected. It had always amazed him to see this.

Liam was still fearful of the dark some nights, so Lily had taken to telling him stories. The notion was sweet, but lately it just riled them up.

He quietly turned the knob and peeked inside. "Lily? You need to bring your story to a close, sweetheart. You two need your sleep."

They didn't have to say anything for him to hear the disappointment in the room. A heavy sigh emerged from Liam. "I don't want to sleep," the young boy pouted.

“I know. But the sooner you close your eyes, the sooner you can open them again. I promise,” Brent added with a soft smile.

It took him another minute for him to be able to convince them to settle down at last for the evening. He was used to this; they went through this matter at least three times a week.

Eventually, he walked away, knowing they would talk a little longer before finally falling asleep.

As he headed back down the hall, Brent considered how the twins would respond to him telling them that he was hoping to remarry. They had been young when their mother died, and already their memories were failing them.

While the two of them would agree over what the older girls said, he knew Lily and Liam were rather uncertain about what it meant to have a mother anymore. He didn't think they would be terribly upset about it.

Most likely, they might appreciate having someone else around that would keep them company.

He checked to make sure the front and back doors were locked and all the windows were fastened shut. Starting back down the hall, he paused when he saw a warm glow creeping out from beneath the door to Penelope and Mary's room.

Sweet Penelope often had a book in hand, but the best time for her to read was usually at night when there couldn't be anyone distracting her.

He hated to take this from her, but he had seen the dark circles under her eyes and knew she needed her rest. She was a growing



girl, after all.

Two knocks and then he stepped into the room.

If anyone would support his decision for a second union, it had to be Penelope.

She had been the one to talk to him about remarrying, after all. And he had a sneaking suspicion that she knew about his letters.

Either way, he knew she wouldn't mind. She might even be a little excited.

"It's time," he whispered in a low voice. "You need to blow out your candle."

Penelope jumped in surprise, jerking her head up. She looked haunted from that angle, with the lighting. "But... the whale just..."

Shaking his head, he knew what would happen if he didn't stop her now.

She would end up reading until morning or until her candle went out. Then she would be cranky and silent once she woke up. It was best that she slept now.

"The story will be there tomorrow, Penelope." He walked forward and kissed her forehead. "Finish the paragraph. Done?"

He waited until she nodded. When she did, he blew out the candle. "Good night, dear."

Mary was in the bed across the room. All he had seen was her

lump under the blankets. He only meant to check to make sure she was fast asleep, but he heard the sniffing first.

It wouldn't be the first time or even the tenth time that he'd found her crying herself to sleep. The young girl went between crying over her mother's death to having terrible nightmares that never made any sense to him.

When she was little, Nicole would let Mary crawl into bed with them until she was fast asleep again so he could bring her back to bed. But she was too old for that now.

Gently touching her shoulder, he leaned over in the dim light from the window. "Mary? What is it this time?"

A loud gulp and then she turned over. He could see the tears glittering in her eyes.

The young girl seemed to feel everything so much more than most people. It tore him to pieces to know he couldn't take care of everything for her.

"I was thinking about Mother," Mary managed to choke out. "I could smell her for a minute. She smelled like cinnamon, Papa."

His shoulders relaxed. "That's right. She did smell like cinnamon. It was from the cinnamon tea she drank every morning.

"I'm glad you can remember that, Mary. Maybe it will help you to sleep better?"

She shook her head. "When I sleep, I forget about her. I don't like doing that. Do you forget about her when you sleep?"

Uncertain of how to answer that, Brent hesitated. “Sometimes. But it’s okay if we’re not always thinking about her, Mary. She understands that.

“We don’t think about each other all the time even when we’re with each other, do we? Your mother would want you to get your sleep now.”

This seemed to be the wrong thing to say.

“What?” Mary choked out. “Why would you say that? Are you forgetting about her? Don’t you still love Mother?”

It broke Brent’s heart to hear his spirited daughter speak like that. He wished he could soothe her pain and help her understand how to move on.

Time didn’t allow for people to live in the past. Though he treasured Nicole and the years they’d had together, Brent knew he couldn’t pretend that everything was fine.

Kneeling by her bed, he leaned over to give her a small hug. “Mary, I will never forget her. No matter what happens, she is my wife and your mother. She is always with us, don’t you remember?

“She will be with you in your dreams. It’s okay not to be sad all the time, all right? I love her just as much as I love you and the others.”

He stayed with Mary until she stopped crying. When he could see that she was having a hard time keeping her eyes open, he slowly climbed back to his feet.

Penelope was fast asleep in her own bed already. After kissing

Mary's forehead, he quietly walked out of the room.

There was still one letter waiting for him on top of the chest.

It lacked a stamp. Tomorrow, he would send it out. He tried to think about this logically so that his heart wouldn't hurt more than it already did.

With time, he knew, he would heal. But he couldn't keep waiting around. Celia was a wonderful woman who seemed ready for the next step in their relationship.

His offer of marriage was written within this letter. If she accepted, then she would most likely arrive in four or five weeks. That would give him time to make this plan work out.

He would need to be able to find a way to tell the children.

All of them would handle it well. All of them except for Mary.

Sighing, Brent undressed for the night as he tried not to worry too much about this plan. He just hoped Mary would understand what was going on.

Perhaps once she could see how lovely Celia was, then his daughter might be able to understand how much better their lives would be to have the woman there.

He fell asleep with a prayer in his heart.

**F**orcing herself to stay calm, Celia glanced up from her seat at the table.

Her parents rarely argued. They had been together for forty-six years and had raised nine children.

There had been one miscarriage, a few broken bones, and now a couple of grandchildren to show for all of their hard work and love.

But tonight, there was no time for this as they discussed what Celia had been up to over the last couple of months.

She had written to the man in California, Mr. Brent Calloway, and they had started up a correspondence that had continued up to this point. Both of her parents were aware of what she was doing.

That was what she had thought, at least.

“I know there were a few letters, but I didn’t know there were so many. I thought this was, I don’t know, something to do to heal or play around with.

“I didn’t think either of you was taking this seriously,” her father pointed out defensively. “Had I known this was being considered, then I would have put a stop to it.”

“You were never in the way of your other children’s relationships,” her mother responded.

That was true. Even when her oldest sister, Eliza, had begun dating the butcher’s son, no one had spoken up about that.

Eliza had been infatuated by the strong young man and had enjoyed several dances with him during the summer she was seventeen before she suddenly changed her mind.

By the time she was eighteen, she was in love with the new schoolmaster. No one had ever told Celia how that had gone; all she knew was that it hadn’t ended well.

But that didn’t matter because Eliza had been married just before her nineteenth birthday to the pastor’s nephew.

There had been a few other questionable girls and boys whom her siblings had courted, but her parents had always waited it out until they’d figured out for themselves what and who they really wanted.

It made Celia wonder what they truly thought of Richard. They had all seemed happy enough when she had married the man.

He was a hard worker, he always went to church, and liked to play ball with the youngsters in the nearby park. She’d thought he was a good man to spend the rest of her life with.

Would it ever stop hurting to know she had been wrong?

Swallowing hard, she put the fork down from her plate and waited for her parents to calm down. They never raised their voices. Eventually, one of them would fold.

“But she doesn’t know him. Not really. Anyone could be writing these letters to Celia,” her father said in a tense voice.

“There’s no reason for her to be spending so much time writing to someone she has never met.”

While her mother was accepting of her budding relationship with Brent, seeing as she was the one to have handed Celia that ad in the first place, her father wasn’t.

Celia understood his concerns. He was a good man who was protective and worried about the horrible things out in the world around them.

Whenever she left the house, he still reminded her to watch where she walked.

She kept her head down when he looked over at her.

Part of her wanted to speak up and tell her father that he simply didn’t understand. All he had to do was read the letters that Brent was sending her to know that he was who he claimed to be.

There was a rough poetic quality to the man’s letters. He wrote in a small, neat print as though he had to focus very hard on every word he wrote.

Her father would know he was honest, but Celia couldn’t imagine letting him read any of the letters she had received.

There was a new one in her pocket just waiting to be read. When her father had seen her pick it up, he had started this argument that she needed to stop this crazy notion.

“Evan, dear, you cannot be serious. Of course he isn’t lying. What would the use of that be? Celia deserves to be happy. She should be able to do as she likes.

“After everything she has been through, she can do as she likes,” her mother added.

Yet her father shook his head. He waved around his utensils when he spoke.

“She can be happy. Of course I want my child to be happy, Rachel. I don’t appreciate you hinting otherwise. But what do you expect to happen here?

“Do you really think we can just send Celia off on her own like this into unknown territory? It’s the West. No one knows what’s out there.”

Gathering her courage, Celia spoke up. “Father, I’m not a child anymore. I can do as I please.”

“I know,” he said in a soft voice before frowning. “But neither of you understand. I wouldn’t be doing my job as a proper father and husband if I didn’t provide a warning.

“People out West are wild. They live among the animals in small towns that are constantly falling apart. There are hardly any streets or doctors.

“If you want to be married again so badly, then you should reach



out to the man you had once: Richard.”

A lump formed in her throat when she heard his name.

Looking down, Celia told herself to stay strong. She couldn't let the tears come again no matter how much she wanted them to.

Though she knew her father meant well, he couldn't possibly understand the hurt he caused with those words.

Richard was the one who had wanted the divorce. He had left her. He'd wanted something that she couldn't give him. Their relationship, once strong and good, had dwindled into years of pain.

She still reached out to him in the bed they used to share, forgetting at times that she was alone again.

Her mother tutted, shaking her head.

“What?” her father protested. Turning to Celia, he tapped his fork on the table. “Think about it, Celia. He was a good man. Maybe a little stubborn and foolish, but still good.

“You're getting older and it isn't that easy finding someone real to marry again. He would be a safe choice. You already know him.

“All you need to do is tell him you're willing to try again for another baby.”

This time, she couldn't stop the tears.

She sucked in a deep breath and then felt the salt on her lips. Taking a shuddering breath, she shook her head before pushing her

chair away from the table.

There was no way for a man to understand the pain within her heart. The hurt that Richard had caused her would never go away. When she had needed him most, he had chosen to leave her.

The thought of going through that heartbreak again tore her to pieces. How could she ever go back to a man, even if he would have her, who could leave her so easily?

“Evan,” her mother scolded her father, “look what you’ve done. Celia, dear?”

He still protested. “What? I’m being reasonable. Someone has to be reasonable here. Celia, where are you going?”

Shaking her head, she left the room and hurried up the stairs to her bedroom, where she closed the door behind her. She collapsed on the bed in a heap, letting the tears fall where they chose.

Celia hugged her pillow after taking a shaky breath. The pillowcase still smelled musty like Richard, urging more tears to fall. It seemed she would never be free of him.

For the rest of her days, she would ache and hurt for all she had lost. Such misery scared her and she wondered if she had done anything to deserve this.

She started to roll over onto her back. Hearing a crinkling sound, she paused and then recalled the letter in her pocket.

Immediately, she sat up.

Her heart pattered. Brent’s letters always lifted her spirits. Perhaps

he would have something inviting to say in this one that could help her forget the heartache she so desperately wanted to forget.

Celia wiped away her tears with her sleeves before hurriedly pulling out the paper. She ripped the envelope open so she could read the letter.

Hungry for his words, she eagerly read them over twice before she understood what he had written.

*I should like to marry you, if you would have me. We have written for months and I care for you deeply.*

*Please respond to me with whatever your decision may be. But I do pray that you accept my proposal.*

It was a proposal. Brent was asking her to marry him. He wanted her. Someone actually cared. She pressed the paper to her chest as she marveled over this incredible moment.

A smile made its way onto her face. She couldn't remember the last time she had smiled. Touching the corners of her lips, Celia looked around her room in search of paper and pen.

A response needed to be sent immediately.

She found what she needed and then curled up on the floor to write her letter. The action made her feel like she was young again, writing love letters.

As she accepted his proposal, Celia wondered if she loved Brent.

Her husband had left her only a few months ago. But as she thought about him, something told her that he had truly left her

sometime before that.

Wasn't it possible to love more than one person?

She bit her lip nervously after closing the letter. It went on her nightstand so that she would remember in the morning to go send it out.

Though she wanted to tell herself to go to sleep now, Celia couldn't. There was energy buzzing around inside her veins. She wanted to smile and celebrate.

Thinking of her mother, she grabbed Brent's last letter before hurrying from her room.

Her father wouldn't approve, so she could tell him another time. But she wanted to tell her mother.

Celia searched around the house before finding her mother alone in the parlor with a book.

"Mother?" she whispered as she hurried over. "I have news!"

Curious, her mother read the letter. Her eyes widened a second into reading.

Clasping a hand over her mouth, the woman pulled Celia into a hug. She was overjoyed; they both were.

"I'm so happy for you," her mother murmured.

There were tears again in Celia's eyes. But this time, she thought, they weren't because of sadness.

She held her mother tightly while she silently thanked the Lord for this miracle. At long last, she was going to have the family she had always wanted.

The day was bright as she looked around.

Everything seemed perfect. Birds were singing in the trees that danced to the music of the wind. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and the weather was just right for spring.

It was her favorite time of year because of all the colors.

Being here made Mary feel happy. She couldn't have taken the smile off her face if she tried.

Then it was made even better when she spotted a familiar figure ahead of her in the tall grass. She gasped excitedly upon finding her mother.

The woman was tall and beautiful. Hair the color of the morning sun trailed down her back. Walking slowly through the grass, her mother hummed along her way.

"Mother, I'm coming!" Mary cried out.

It felt like forever since she had seen her mother. The joy she felt upon seeing the woman was overwhelming. There was so much

she wanted to say.

Once she reached her mother, she could hug her and tell her everything. When was the last time her mother had hugged her? It didn't matter if they were about to be together again.

She giggled, hurrying into the tall grass. It tickled her bare skin along the way.

Looking up, she saw her mother moving forward. The woman was starting to pick up speed and was going in the other direction. This confused Mary, but she kept running.

It had to be a game, she decided. Her mother was making her chase her and then they would be together again.

Any minute now, Mary thought to herself. She was almost there.

She stretched out her hands just as she thought she might reach her mother's skirts. But she touched nothing.

Instead, she felt the clouds swirl overhead and wipe out the sun. When she paused to look up, Mary saw the darkness growing around them. A chill in the air made her shiver.

The perfect day was gone and something else had taken its place.

Though she reached out to her mother, those two seconds had given the woman more than enough time to move further away. Alarm struck her.

Gasping, she hurried after so that she wouldn't lose her mother. She picked up her feet even though she was beginning to grow weary, arms aching.

“Mother!” Mary cried out. “Mother, come back! Please!”

The cheer and the hope she had felt mere moments ago had faded away into a new sense of panic that gripped her tightly. Her heart thudded loudly in her chest.

She had never felt so alone and so lost. Seeing her mother in the distance, she noticed the woman hardly looked human anymore. And then, suddenly, she was gone.

A scream of despair ripped through Mary.

It was so loud that she woke herself up, sitting up to find herself drenched in cold sweat.

Tears flooded down her cheeks to only make her situation worse. Her lungs were tired and she managed to end her scream.

Gasping, she looked around in the darkness. It had only been a dream, she realized, a horrible dream. But that wasn't the reassurance she was looking for.

The best kind would have been to have her mother there to let Mary know that she wasn't alone in the dark. That was all Mary wanted.

However, her mother was gone.

She hiccuped before turning, patting her hands around in the blankets as she quickly searched for something else that might bring her the comfort she sought. Her body continued to shiver and shake.

It took a moment to find the doll.



Snatching it up, Mary wrapped her arms around it tightly for comfort. She closed her eyes and tried to tell herself that she didn't need to be scared of anything.

That was harder to do in a moment like this. All she wanted was someone there to run their hands through her hair and hug her tightly.

"Mother," she whispered.

Her eyes trailed over to the other end of the room, where her older sister continued to sleep.

Penelope had slept through storms, fights between the twins, and more. She could certainly sleep through some screaming.

The door swung open and her father darted through. She would recognize his broad-shouldered shadow anywhere. The man hastened right over to her side.

A hiccup escaped her lips and then she was kicking herself free of her blankets to bury herself in his protective arms.

"Mary," her father breathed softly.

Shakily breathing, Mary sniffled and closed her eyes. There was still someone to protect her and to keep her safe when she was scared. She couldn't let herself forget this.

He was a strong man with firm shoulders and rough hands, but he was always gentle with his children. He made her think of a well-built house, one that was strong and offered protection.

The hiccups slowly faded away as he stroked her hair. Mary hid

her face in the crook of his neck, finding comfort in his familiar smell.

The dream had scared her terribly to be in the dark and so alone.

Though it was still dark outside, she knew she wasn't alone. Her earlier fears were pushed aside now. Her heartbeat slowed down as she began to relax.

"It's all right," her father murmured quietly. They slowly rocked back and forth on the bed. "You're safe, Mary, I promise. It's all right."

Keeping her eyes tightly shut, Mary wanted to believe that.

She was safe. Nothing bad would happen to her. This was her bed in her house and her father was beside her. How could anything go wrong?

That brought her no comfort. She had seen enough bad happen in the world to know there was no guarantee of safety.

*I don't want to remember*, she told herself as the memories started to come to mind. They prodded and poked her like they were asking for attention.

She sat still in her father's arms while trying to think about anything besides what was already on her mind.

It wasn't working.

The dream bothered Mary in a way that she couldn't explain. If her father asked, and she knew he would in the morning, she wasn't certain what she wanted to say about the matter.

After all, she had been raised to know that lying was bad.

Would her father understand? Part of her wanted to believe so, but there was that little voice in the back of her mind that was troubling her.

It wouldn't go away no matter what she tried to do about it. She felt as though it would be with her until she eventually gave in to whatever it wanted.

And she knew it wanted her to think about her mother.

Mary sniffled. She had been so close to holding her mother's hand in that dream. Would it have felt the same as back when her mother was still alive?

Would her mother have turned to look at her and smile that same smile from so many years ago? Questions swirled around her mind until she felt a headache begin.

If only she could have one last happy memory with her mother.

Just before the woman had passed, this had not been the case for the two of them.

It still haunted Mary these couple of years later. Losing her mother had been so sudden; no one had been prepared, least of all herself.

That day lingered constantly in the back of her mind as though to remind her of how awful life could be.

Her fear passed, but a tightness in her chest formed, along with a lump in her throat. Though her tears had stopped a minute ago, she had a feeling they would start up again.

*I just wish I could tell Mother how sorry I am.*

Mary knew how stubborn she could be. It had caused problems in their family before.

There were times she was sent early to her bedroom for the evening or was restricted from playing for other reasons. Her mother used to call her 'spirited.'

Was that the reason she had been angry that day?

It was supposed to have been a simple trip into town for the day. Her other siblings had wanted to go out and play with their father since it was calving season.

She had been hoping her mother would let her get a new dress. The one she wore was growing tight and all the other girls had ones with lace on their sleeves.

*"We can simply add a ribbon to your sleeves,"* her mother had suggested at the time on their wagon ride into town. *"You don't need a whole new dress, Mary. Not yet."*

That had made her pout, growing angry.

*"You're not listening,"* she'd retorted. *"You don't understand. All the other girls are dressed like that. I'll be the only one. You don't want me all left out on my own, do you? They'll make fun of me!"*

*"Penelope doesn't have lace on her sleeves, either,"* her mother had pointed out.

Her mother always sat up straight on the wagon bench. Never raising her voice, she spoke matter-of-factly and even with a small

smile in the corner of her mouth.

It was a smile as if to tell Mary that her mother didn't actually care and was getting ready to tease her, as well.

Frustration had bubbled within Mary as she'd balled her hands into fists. Didn't her mother care? She made an angry retort and huffed.

*"Come now, we haven't even made it to the shop. You cannot be angry so quickly, Mary. I thought we could have some fun. Just the two of us, don't you think?"* her mother had prompted her.

A glimmer of light had revealed itself. *"Then can we get candy? I can go to the general store by myself to get it,"* Mary added eagerly.

This was apparently not what her mother had been getting at. The two of them made their way into town.

Arguing along the way, Mary tried to explain that she was old enough to do this on her own. She wasn't a baby like the twins were.

They continued their strained argument upon reaching the busy town square.

*"You can't always tell me what to do,"* she had whined. *"Mother!"*

The moment their wagon came to a stop, Mary had jumped down and ran across the street to prove that she was both brave enough and old enough to do this.

*"Mary, come back here,"* her mother had called out after her in frustration.

Those were the last words that her mother ever said. They had rung in Mary's ears for the last couple of years as a bitter reminder of what had happened.

The accident had been so sudden. She had grumbled and started back to her mother's side, knowing that her father would be furious if he learned about her behavior.

But there was a new stagecoach coming through town and it ran straight down the street. Her mother had been there to push her out of the way.

It was all Mary's fault.

Curling up tighter in her father's arms, she shifted and tried to clear her mind.

The guilt never left her. Instead, it grew like a heavy, dark shadow on her shoulders that brought her nightmares and worries almost every night.

Why had she gone into the road like that?

She had no right to be angry at her mother for anything. If she had only listened, everything would have been fine. Then she would still have her mother by her side.

A few more tears spilled down her cheeks as she felt the pain in her heart grow. She missed her mother dearly.

There was nothing she or anyone could do. Not now. It had been years and nothing would ever change.

Sighing into her father's neck, Mary felt her body relax. The soft

motions of his rocking began to ease her heartache.

She eventually fell asleep, uncertain of exactly when her father set her back in her bed for the rest of the night.

When she woke up, Mary vaguely remembered the nightmare and her father's comfort.

She dressed herself before heading out into the kitchen. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Penelope trying to help their father at the stovetop.

"Don't burn anything, Penny," she sang, just to annoy her sister. Penelope had never liked that nickname.

Her older sister glanced over just to make a face at her before turning back to the porridge.

Mary set the table before the twins emerged from their rooms. Her father set the food on the table and soon they were all seated, ready to eat.

It wasn't a lot of food, and it wasn't particularly delicious. Feeling her stomach growl, Mary thought of her mother's delicious dish.

Her mother used to bake biscuits and top them with chopped-up sausage before adding hot, savory gravy. But they hadn't had that since her mother passed away.

Mary wished she could eat it just one more time. She sighed, playing with her spoon.

"I have an announcement to make."

She stopped playing with her spoon, looking up at her father. Mary glanced at her siblings from the corner of her eyes to see if they knew what was going on, but it was clear from their curious expressions that they didn't.

Her stomach flip-flopped. An announcement? What did her father have to say?

Maybe it was about the cows or the horses. Maybe they were getting a cook who could make them real food. They wouldn't be moving, would they?

A dozen thoughts ran through her mind as she tried to figure out what was going on. Her father never had any reason to make announcements, so this had to mean something big. But what?

"Yes, Father?" Penelope asked politely after a moment of silence.

They all watched him look around at the four of them. While Mary knew her father was old, she didn't know quite how old. Just old enough.

He needed a haircut, but she knew how their mother used to love running her hands through his curls. Dark circles under his eyes made Mary wonder if those were her fault for waking him with her screaming.

She hadn't meant to do it; that had been an accident. Just another accident.

A strained smile made its way onto her father's face as he cleared his throat. This was serious. She straightened up and even put her spoon down.



“There will be someone new joining us in the house soon. I have given it a lot of thought over the last couple of months, and I want you all to know that I am doing this for all of us.

“So, I am getting remarried. I’m marrying a woman named Celia, and—”

“What?” Mary shouted in disbelief.

She shoved her plate away from her, banging it into the large bowl of porridge. Something loud cracked, but she didn’t care.

She just gaped at her father in devastation over his words of betrayal.

He hesitated as though he knew he was wrong to do this. “Now, Mary...”

Shaking her head, she felt the panic rip through her. “No. No! Why would you do this? What about Mother? You are already married! Did you forget her? Did you forget Mother?”

Mary had to stand up even though she felt her body starting to shake. She felt even worse than she had the night before. Tears trailed down her cheeks.

It took all her strength not to jump up and down in her anger. What was her father doing to them?

This was her fault, she knew. If her mother hadn’t died, this wouldn’t be happening.

Her father opened his mouth and began to stand up.

But she couldn't let him get away with this. "No! You can't get married again. You can't. Why do you think you can just replace Mother?"

"This can't happen. I won't let it! How could you be so mean?"

Never before had Mary felt so betrayed. Her chest heaved as she gasped for breath. She felt her tongue growing tangled with emotion.

There was so much more she wanted to say. But when she saw her father reach out for her, she couldn't stand for him to touch her.

Screaming, she ran out of the house.

**N**one of it felt real to Celia until the train arrived at the station.

Inhaling deeply, she watched the smoke above them and then studied the people who flooded out. There were packages and boxes and luggage to move about.

Some of them had arrived in Boston to stay while others were merely sorting through the containers.

She wrinkled her nose at the smell of the wind. She had never been a fan of smoke in the past and didn't particularly like it now.

But she did her best to stay unbothered. Soon, she would be boarding that very train to leave Boston and make her way out to California to marry Mr. Brent Calloway.

Her heart churned nervously. She could hardly believe this was really happening.

Only a year ago, she had been praying so hard that she was finally going to start a family with Richard. But now all of that was gone.

There were mornings where she woke up confused, not certain of what she was doing with herself. It was time that she stopped waiting around.

Taking a deep breath, Celia turned to her parents beside her. They had insisted on coming with her to the station to help her with her luggage and to say farewell.

She hadn't wanted to admit it, but she was grateful to them for doing so.

Marrying Richard had meant that she had stayed rather close to her parents in town. They used to visit together most Sundays over supper.

While most of her siblings had left the city, she had been the one to stay. She had assumed it would always be that way.

But now, she was about to cross the wilderness for a man she had never met, and she knew there was a chance she would never see her mother and father again.

The very thought made her throat close up.

"Oh, my dear girl," her mother murmured emotionally before pulling her into a hug. It was difficult to tell which one of them needed it most.

Beside them, her father sniffed. The man had his hands on his hips as he studied the station seriously. Every couple of seconds, he glanced over at them.

There was that typical stern look on his face, though his eyes appeared a little softer than usual.

“I should go,” she murmured with a shaky voice. “They won’t be boarding forever.”

Her father noisily cleared his throat. “Celia, don’t forget that this doesn’t have to be the end. You can return here whenever you like.

“If things get too hard out West, you can always come back. We’ll help you find Richard and you can beg him to take you back.”

The words had been so kind except for that last statement.

Biting her tongue, Celia forced herself to restrain her anger.

She had tried to get him to understand that such a thing would never happen. But he was still a traditional man who didn’t believe in divorce no matter what she said.

She didn’t want their parting words to be of frustration or anything rude. Turning away with a slight shake of her head, she pulled back from her mother and managed a tentative smile.

“Thank you for everything,” Celia said. “Truly. I shall write to you when I have arrived so that you know I’m safe. And you’ll write back to me, won’t you?”

Her mother nodded hurriedly before putting a suitcase in her free hand. “Of course, my dear. Be careful of where you walk. Watch out for trouble and don’t eat anything unfamiliar.

“I packed you some food in that bag for when you’re hungry, along with a few coins. Oh, and there’s a scarf, too, in case you grow chilly.”

“Dear,” her father interrupted in slight annoyance.

Celia shared one last smile with her mother, nodding to show that she understood.

Her mother had always tried to take care of her and her other siblings. Sometimes it felt like too much. But she had always known that this was her mother's way of trying to show her love.

"Thank you," Celia told them again. "I love you both. Goodbye, now."

It was time for her to go. She felt a thrill run up her spine as she moved away and then climbed up the steps to board the train.

She had been on one once when she'd traveled north to visit her brother and his family for the holidays nearly eight years ago. But that was some time ago and certainly a shorter ride.

Finding herself a seat, she wondered how the next couple of days would go. Pleasantly, she hoped, and quickly so she could reach her new home.

There was an open seat by the window. Celia sat there and looked out for her parents, but it appeared they had already left. A moment later, a loud whistle rang and the train started off.

This was really happening.

Concentrating on her breathing, she told herself not to be so nervous. What was there to be nervous about? She had been married before so she knew what that was like.

Though she hadn't met Brent in person, they had been writing letters for a couple of months; surely she had a decent idea of the kind of person he was.

And then there were the children.

Celia fumbled with her hair, twirling it in knots around her fingers. It had always been such a bad habit of hers and one she couldn't seem to break.

"It will be perfect," she murmured quietly to herself in an attempt to calm her nerves.

There wouldn't be any problems. Wasn't she wonderful with children? Everyone in her family told her so.

She had grown up taking care of the neighborhood children for their mothers on occasion and they had always loved her.

Being a mother was everything she wanted; to want something this bad, surely she would be good at it.

Yet she hadn't met *these* children.

She ran through their names again: Penelope, Mary, Liam, and Lily. How old were they again?

Frowning, she opened the carpet bag she had set beside her on the bench to dig around for the letters. There was no way she could forget something so important as their ages.

Usually, she was fantastic with children. She didn't need to be so anxious.

"Twelve, ten, six, six," Celia murmured. That's what she had thought. Sighing, she put the letter down and tried to relax.

The well-worn letters were in a neat pile, tied together with a piece

of ribbon. Growing thoughtful, she pulled out the last one that Brent had sent her.

It had included money for her train ticket and some helpful directions.

She swallowed her nerves.

How had the children reacted? He hadn't said anything about that in his most recent letter, only that he was thrilled to have her there soon at last.

They had to know she was coming. Brent wouldn't be so cruel as to surprise them with her arrival. Perhaps she didn't have her own children, but Celia knew that this would be a bad idea.

No, those children surely knew she was on her way to them.

Were they excited? Hopeful? Upset? Nervous, like she was?

Smoothing out her dress, Celia convinced herself that Brent would have alerted her if his children were upset about their impending marriage.

They had to take the children into consideration for this situation and they needed to know that everything would work out well for them.

She nodded and managed to put on a small smile. The soft dress she wore lifted her spirits. It was the nicest one she had ever owned, even nicer than the one she had been married in.

This dress was soft, well-fitted, and made her look like a lady. Surely, it would be perfect to wear while meeting her new family.



It had to be.

The first two days on the train were easy enough to get through.

Celia watched the other people move about and enjoyed wandering down the aisle. She reread Brent's letters and ate the food her mother had prepared for her. It was almost a party.

But the third day, the last day on her own like this, brought a new fear into her belly. The butterflies within her stomach fluttered madly for their escape.

She couldn't stop the worries from racing through her mind.

All of a sudden, all she could hear was her father's voice in her ears. All of his statements about her going back to her ex-husband, trying to make that work again, echoed in her mind.

She couldn't make it go away.

What if he was right?

The questions brought more questions. She wondered if living out West would be as hard as people said.

Though her family had always had enough to be somewhat comfortable, she had no idea what to expect in California. What if life out there was too hard for her?

And then there was Brent. She had never actually met the man. What if he had lied about who he was and what he was like? The man could be cruel and abusive without her having guessed.

What if the children were mean? The entire family might hate her.

Though Celia attempted to convince herself she was simply driving herself mad, the worries wouldn't go away. She was alone on the train, with no one to talk to and remind her that she was wrong.

The confidence she had worked so hard to build for this trip began to dwindle into a strong sense of doubt. After all, she had failed to make one family work.

What if she couldn't make this one work out, either? She hadn't heard of someone being so bad at having a family, but she supposed that anything was possible.

The thought began to drown her. An unsettling sensation grew heavy in her stomach and it wouldn't go away.

The fear that God didn't intend for her to have a family grew and grew.

In the morning, Celia had nearly convinced herself to turn right back around for Boston again. That place was filled with hard memories, but at least it was a home she knew.

This was such an unnecessary risk to take, crossing the territories into the wilderness.

Her dress was wrinkled and she hadn't slept well. Her eyes searched the outside world for some sort of sign to tell her what was going on.

But nothing spoke to her. Everyone else in her compartment was growing louder with excitement.

This was the last leg of the journey.

The train would turn back for the east coast after this final stop. People were going where they wanted to go and were thrilled for the adventure before them.

Celia wished the excitement would rub off on her. She wondered if it would have been different if someone had accompanied her on this train to hold her hand and reassure her of what might happen next.

And then the train pulled into the station, telling her she was out of time.

**B**rent rubbed his hands together and then on his jeans.

Inhaling deeply, he held his breath for a moment and then let it out. He had been hoping that would help him slow down his beating heart. It didn't work.

He was beginning to wonder if he would ever feel calm again. Already he had been nervous about this day; it had been on his mind since he made the decision to invite Celia to come join him and his family in California.

Then it had been made even more complicated when he'd told the children two days ago.

Part of him wasn't certain that Mary would ever speak to him again.

Shaking his head, Brent shifted his feet and turned his attention back to the station where he stood. It wasn't much, just an open-air platform with a short rooftop covering—and when the wind was strong, it had a tendency to lean slightly.

But that was the least of his concerns.

He glanced around. Their town was a fair size, but most folks who came there were making their way to the shore or to the gold. The rest was just deliveries from the larger cities.

Yet, once in a while, there was a family who came to stay.

That had been him, once. He had come from Wyoming with Nicole shortly after Penelope was born.

His father had passed away, the last of their surviving parents, and they had wanted to start somewhere new for their little family.

He had built the ranch he had always dreamed about, and they had begun the family they had always talked about. Though their livelihood was rough at times, at least they had one another.

They used to.

The pain he felt over losing his wife would never fade away. This was something he had learned that he would feel tied to him for the rest of his life.

There were times where it merely made him feel numb. Having to still make time for the ranch and his children kept him from spending much time on himself or his feelings.

It made him pause as he considered why he had chosen to remarry.

Was this for himself?

But then he quickly shook his head. No, this was not for himself. He was fine being on his own. No, this was for the children. They needed someone else there for them.

Whether they knew it or not, whether they understood the matter, they needed more guidance and support than what he could provide.

A whistle rang out.

Jerking his head up, Brent watched as the train came around the bend. The brakes squealed as the machine started to slow down in order to reach the station safely.

He took a step back anyway, feeling his heart skip a beat.

This was really happening. He straightened up and fixed his jacket.

Running a hand through his hair, he couldn't help but be relieved that the children had stayed home. He was nervous enough on his own without having to worry about them, as well.

The train stopped. Brent stopped fidgeting as the doors opened. Nearly twenty people came down those steps with bags. They talked and hurried about their way, hardly taking notice of him.

He cleared his throat, telling himself to pay attention.

He only needed to keep an eye out for one person. Somewhere in that crowd was the woman he was about to marry, and he needed to be ready for her.

Though he thought he had been prepared for this moment, Brent was caught by surprise when he noticed the single lone woman emerging from the crowd.

Could this be her? It had to be; she was the only one on her own and she was even walking right over to him.

Celia had mentioned her blond hair and her brown eyes, but she had not mentioned how big her eyes shined or how her hair hung down to her waist in graceful curls.

She walked tall with her shoulders straight, taller than he had anticipated. Her figure was soft with curves in a nice dress that emphasized the cream of her skin.

The woman was beautiful.

“Brent? It’s so good to meet you at last,” she said with a gracious smile. There was a slight accent to her words that made his heart patter.

“And you,” he told her with a nod. “I’m glad you arrived safely, Celia. I’ve been waiting for this for some time.”

A soft blush crept up her cheeks before she nodded. “Indeed. The anticipation has been rather terrible. But it’s over now and I’m here. So, this is the town of San Terias, then?”

The two of them turned toward the town where he lived. And now, of course, she would live. It had been settled by missionaries about thirty years ago, though they had since left.

Now, the town acted as a port for the train station that many travelers used to pass through on their way south to Mexico or north to Sacramento.

A few more streets had been added to the area since he had first moved there. He’d helped construct a few roads himself to support the community over the years.

Though they still only had one church, they had a fair amount of

shops now and plenty of homes. It was a good place to live, he thought, and a fair spot to raise children.

“It’s spread out,” Celia observed with her head tilted to the side. “There’s plenty of room to breathe out here. I quite like it.”

“That’s a relief,” he responded jokingly.

The two of them chuckled before moving down away from the station. She had a large bag in one hand that he took from her while she carried a carpet bag in her other hand.

They made their way over to his wagon where he put her belongings in the back, alongside the couple of purchases he had made before stopping at the station for her.

“Here, allow me.”

Brent caught Celia before she could climb into the wagon seat without his aid. He offered her his hand, finding himself smiling without meaning to as she thanked him and accepted his help to sit down.

She looked around while he circled the two horses to climb up beside her.

His breath caught before he could pick up the reins. No one had sat up there beside him since Nicole passed away.

The children were still young and so easily distracted that he had never wanted to take any unnecessary risks. He never rode with anyone else, so it was the first time in years since someone had sat so close beside him on the bench.



She smelled like brown sugar.

A soft giggle escaped Celia's lips. Turning to him, she wore a sweet smile that showed she hadn't noticed his moment of unease.

He welcomed her brightness immediately as he straightened up.

"Did you see that? The little boy over there was kissing the horse's nose. It was such a sweet thing to do," she added.

His eyes wandered off in the direction she gestured to, but he didn't recognize the child hurrying over into a nearby shop with his parents. But he could picture the scene as she'd described it.

Feeling his heart soften, he fixed his grip on the reins and nudged the horses along.

"Is this very different from home?" he asked her after a moment.

A short chuckle escaped Celia's lips as she nodded. The young woman promptly dove into all the differences from the big city, using her hands occasionally while she talked.

He asked her questions that propelled the conversation forward.

Whether they were talking or not, the atmosphere between them wasn't awkward.

This shocked Brent. He had it all built up in his mind, the worry and intimidation of bringing another woman home.

Once married, he had done his best to never think of another woman. He knew who he loved and was truly dedicated to her.

He hadn't expected to feel anything for Celia in their letters, though that had certainly changed over the course of their correspondence.

Yet he still hadn't thought it would be so easy to be with her on this wagon ride.

He kept his hands on the reins, loose but firm. They talked cheerfully about the landscape and it kept him occupied from his worries and doubts.

Those had disappeared as he led them down the road through town before moving to a quieter path away from the busy streets.

"This is beautiful," Celia murmured when they rounded the bend. "Look at those mountains! I've never seen anything like them before.

"Is the house nearby? Can you see them out your window?"

The homestead he had picked had been the only one available at the time for him to buy. He was more focused on the ground he owned than their surroundings.

Life was busy and he felt he didn't always have time to enjoy the view around him. But he found himself pondering this as she talked excitedly about the land.

She had a point, after all.

Though he had grown up around bigger mountains back in Wyoming, Brent knew the view they had here still offered an impressive landscape of green grass, prairies, and mountains that always seemed to be capped white with snow.

Maybe his homestead hadn't been much of a choice, but they had assuredly been fortunate.

He pointed out his home ahead of them, just veering slightly from the trail. "The house is right over there. So, yes, I guess we can see mountains from the windows."

When he looked at Celia, she appeared even more beautiful than that first moment he had laid eyes on her. She had a hand over her heart while she studied their surroundings.

She seemed in complete awe.

"This is incredible," she gushed. "There aren't mountains in Boston, you know. A few hills, but not very much. I went on a train up north once and saw mountains along the way.

"I don't think any of them compare to this view, though. And you say that's the ranch? It's so green! And you painted the barn. This is beautiful, Brent."

Her enthusiasm never dampened.

As they rolled down the path to the house, Brent told her about how he had built the house. They cheerfully talked all the way until he stopped.

Everything was going so well; it felt as though he had known Celia for a long time.

He just prayed this feeling remained once he had introduced her to the children.

Clearing his throat, Brent climbed down from his seat and made

his way around to help Celia onto the grass. She gladly accepted his hand.

She even gave him a squeeze before letting go, a small action that caught him off-guard and left him speechless. He told himself that it meant nothing, but the questions remained.

“Well, you made it,” he told her. “Are you ready to meet the kids?”

The nerves that he’d thought had gone away came back to make a mess of the inside of his stomach. Celia meeting his children felt like the real test here.

When he’d sent that proposal to her, he was ready. But were the children? What about her?

“I am,” Celia answered. “Are they in the house?”

He shook his head. Taking her hand once more, Brent redirected them from the buildings to head into the northern meadow.

Wildflowers and tall grass and low trees made for the perfect place where the children could play. He had asked his nearest neighbor to come watch them for a short while.

Annie Mae was an older woman with a cheerful demeanor who had been more than happy to help out. The closer they drew to the meadow, the louder he could hear them shouting and laughing.

His heart fluttered. How was this about to go?

They soon came into view. The girls were chasing each other about while Liam was hand in hand with Annie Mae, exploring the birds in the trees.

“Hello!” Brent called out. “I’m back. We’re here!”

All the action stopped, voices growing quiet as his children turned to look at him. He inhaled and gave them all a big smile.

Making sure Celia wasn’t too nervous, he beckoned everyone to come over. Annie Mae stayed back and offered a wave before nudging Liam forward.

He chuckled when the kids gathered in a half-circle but still remained a few yards away.

“A little closer, please. Come on now. This won’t take long. I just wanted to get us all acquainted here. I’ve been waiting for this day for a while now.

“It’s time for all of you to meet Celia. She’s come all the way from Boston to join our family. No need to be shy now.”

They crept a few steps closer and that was it.

None of them were smiling. An uncomfortable silence settled between their party. He tried to think of something more to say to convince them to behave.

Weren’t any of them eager to have Celia there?

Shifting his weight from foot to foot, Brent tried to think.

“I’m so thrilled to be here. I’ve heard so much about all of you,” Celia began.

She offered a small wave and smiled widely. Crouching down to their eye level, she motioned for them to come toward her. This

worked, albeit slowly.

“Your hair is so lovely. What’s your name?”

Penelope fumbled with her hair. “I’m Penelope and I’m the oldest one,” she added cautiously. She was shy, hardly keeping her gaze up.

All of the children were shy but that didn’t stop Celia. Her smile never faltered.

She truly was an incredible woman; both gentle and inviting, she drew a few words out of Penelope and the twins. Though they were hesitant, they seemed receptive enough.

This gave Brent hope. It was all going better than he could have anticipated.

“And you? I see you,” Celia sang out.

His stomach tightened when he looked over at Mary. She was the one who Celia was talking to. While Penelope and the twins had crept closer to them, Mary had made sure to keep her distance.

The young girl hunched with her arms crossed as though to make certain that no one could mistake her sour mood.

*Please, he prayed, please, help Mary accept Celia.*

“Hello there,” Celia continued with that sweet smile still on her face. She straightened up and waved before taking a small step forward.

With the sunlight falling across her like that, she looked like an

angel.

“And you? What’s your name?”

Brent’s hope dwindled when his daughter’s face darkened. He felt himself tense up, preparing for the worst as he prayed that her heart might soften.

Mary had been in a bad mood since his announcement a few days ago.

Straightening up, his daughter snapped a loud response. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t want a new mom. I don’t want a new mom!”

And then she took off running.

**I**t had been going so well. Hadn't it?

Celia's slow development of confidence immediately wilted when the young girl screamed.

The other three children had been shy but welcoming enough. She knew how strange it had to be, bringing someone new into the home.

Losing a mother had to be painful, and gaining one had to be strange. This was complicated for the entire family. No matter one's age, they could still be easily upset.

But this was not what she had expected.

Her shoulders slumped in devastation as Mary took off running away from them.

She had known all their names, placing them instantly, but she had wanted to greet the children in a more comforting manner. They didn't know her, so she had thought pretending to not know them at all was the best way to go.



Perhaps this had not been the best course of action.

Why was she so upset? As Celia straightened up, her gaze followed the young girl with her long hair trailing behind her as she hurried off.

Mary wasn't just running—she was running to get away from *her*.

Immediately, this triggered the pain Celia had felt the morning she had woken up to find that Richard was gone and no longer wanted to be with her.

She felt alone and lost, confused over why someone could despise her so. A lump formed in her throat as she attempted to salvage her composure.

Though she'd held crying children in her arms before, none of them had cried because of anything she had done. This was so new to her that an overwhelming sense of frustration threatened to consume her.

"Brent, I—" Celia started although she didn't know what else to say.

She had just given him a glance before she heard a sniffle. It made her pause, looking over at the twins. It was Liam, and then Lily began to cry, as well.

They clung to one another when the tears fell. This was so new to them that they must have been nervous as well, especially since one of their older sisters had just taken off crying.

The poor children. Trying to think of what she could do to salvage this situation, Celia took an anxious step toward the twins.

But they backed up, clutching each other. Her eyes widened in alarm when she realized they were scared of her.

The lump in her throat only seemed to grow as she watched the eldest girl, Penelope, hurriedly wrap her arms around the two children who began to weep noisily in the quiet afternoon.

“It’s all right,” Penelope said as she tried to comfort them. Redirecting them to move around Celia, she guided them toward the house.

“Really, I promise. No one is going to hurt you. We’re all safe here. There’s no need to cry now, I mean it.”

She looked like a little mother, walking with them like that.

Perhaps that was something she was used to doing now without their mother there any longer. It broke Celia’s heart in more ways than one while she watched them go.

The twins had no reason to be scared. She just wanted to make them all happy and nothing more.

But there was the young girl, their big sister, having to grow up before she should have to at all because there was no other mother figure to do that for them.

Everything happened so quickly. One minute she had been making Liam smile, and in the next, the children were hurrying away from her in tears.

Where had she gone wrong?

Her mind was all over the place. Celia clutched her shaking hands

together as she wished she could have said or done something to fix this.

She wished she could have responded in a better manner that would have prevented this sudden and unmitigated disaster.

Yet she had no idea what she could have done. All the stories that Brent had shared with her could not have prepared her for such a negative reaction.

She wasn't certain that anything in all the world could have prepared her for this. If there was ever anyone crying, it was usually her.

She tried to hide her hands in her skirts before turning to look at Brent.

The man rubbed his neck awkwardly, keeping his gaze down and away from her while he watched his children running away.

He hadn't done anything when this happened. Surely, he could not have predicted this to have occurred. She had a feeling that he had also expected this to go better.

Could he have done anything to comfort them? Though she liked to think that was the case, she knew she wouldn't dream of judging him.

Clearly, Brent was doing his best as their father. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

"I... I am sorry about that," he said at last. "Mary is certainly the spirited one, but I didn't think she would take this so poorly.

“And the children are close. Very close, so when one of them is upset, well...”

He didn't need to continue for the two of them to understand.

Letting out a breath she hadn't meant to hold, Celia slowly managed a nod. She hardly knew what to say in response to this. The children didn't know her and so this wasn't a personal matter.

She told herself this repeatedly to try and block out the memory of her former husband refusing her, as well.

Someone wanted her, she told herself. Brent did. The children didn't understand, but they would someday soon.

It had been foolish to think that everything would fall into place perfectly the moment she arrived. Just because she had enjoyed her correspondence with Brent didn't mean their new life together would be easy.

Celia gave herself a strong talking-to before speaking up. “I understand, Brent. They have been through a lot. It must be terribly confusing for all of them. I just hope...”

He nodded before she had to say a word. “I know. Trust me, they will learn to like you as much as I do. They just need some more time.

“I guess I could have tried talking to them some more before your arrival. I just...”

Moving closer to him, she shrugged. “It's all right. I think.”

A short, dry chuckle escaped his lips before he sighed. “I know.”

He inhaled and then gave her a reassuring look. The furrowed brow had smoothed out and the frown lines had disappeared.

“It’ll be hard at first, and we already talked about it. They just need time. I promise, Celia, they’ll warm up to you.”

His words were kind and comforting. More than anything, she wanted to believe him.

She nodded and rubbed her hands together before glancing toward the house where the children had gone. Part of her wanted to run to them and apologize while the other part feared to step into the home where they felt safest, worrying that perhaps they would be too uncomfortable.

This made her wonder where she might belong within this family.

“Celia, I believe?”

Turning around, she saw the neighbor heading over to them. She was older with graying hair and bright blue eyes. And she was smiling as if she hadn’t just seen the children run away from Celia.

“I’m Annie Mae. I’m your neighbor here; my cottage is just over the corner there. It’s such a pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard lovely things about you.

“Now, I believe we have a wedding to prepare the two of you for?”

She was both kind and frank.

Inhaling deeply, Celia ignored the flip of her stomach as she offered a smile to the other woman.

Of course, the wedding needed to take place upon her arrival. That had been mentioned in the last letters she had exchanged with Brent.

They were decent and respectable people, after all. Any courtship of their desire had been completed within their letters.

“That’s right.” Brent stepped up beside them. “The pastor should be on his way over. There’s a spare room for you to dress or... do anything you like,” he added sheepishly after a pause.

“Come, I’ll help you out,” Annie Mae offered.

Celia shared a smile with the two of them, nodding before they started up to the house.

None of them had much to say, although the neighbor politely asked about her travels once they had passed the barn.

The children could be heard when she entered the home but she couldn’t see them anywhere.

“There you are. That’s the room,” Brent said as he gestured to a nearby room.

He opened the door to reveal a pile of books with some scattered furniture. There was a beautiful window seat that looked covered in dust, unused and untouched for years.

It just needed to be cleaned up to be a perfect little room. Celia stepped inside and looked around curiously. A smile made its way across her lips. Why wasn’t it being used?

“You already look lovely. But I think we could brush out your hair,

don't you think?" Annie Mae asked as she closed the door behind them.

"Truly. That dress you're wearing is finer than anything I've ever seen before. Oh, I did bring my old veil, though. I thought you might like that."

Celia turned back to the woman, who brought her bag out and set it on the table. Inside was a thick hairbrush and a small hair clip with some white lace attached. She nodded and then came over.

"You're very nice," Celia murmured. "Thank you. That's so kind of you to help me. And to help this family. I saw how much Liam liked playing with you."

The older woman helped her to a chair and then started brushing her hair. She was comfortable in the home and clearly had experience helping others.

This reminded Celia of her mother. Having never been so far from her parents, she was grateful to feel that same sense of comfort and kindness around her.

A minute of silence passed before Annie Mae sighed and then began speaking. "They are sweet children. Most of the time they are perfect angels.

"Even Mary, though I know she didn't present the best side of herself today. It's been hard, you know. For all of them, but especially her.

"Losing a mother is hard. But for her, well... She was there with her mother when it happened."

The words were said so softly that Celia nearly missed them.

Feeling her heartbeat slow, she wondered if she had heard right. She thought of the little that Brent had said about the wife who had passed.

It had been around two years since Nicole's death. That was all she could recall learning; never would she ask about such a painful burden he had to carry.

"It was an accident?" Celia asked after a moment.

Annie Mae hummed a few notes and then set the hairbrush down. She walked in front of Celia before smiling. It was a sad smile, though.

Leaning over to the table, the woman picked up the veil and then started to carefully clip it in her hair.

"A stagecoach surprised them out in the road, I'm afraid. Mary made it out alive but her mother did not. That was such a horrible incident that scarred everyone, but no one so badly as her.

"Mary hasn't been the same since. But, perhaps, with you here, that could someday change," Annie Mae added hopefully.

Hearing this story changed everything for Celia. She swallowed hard as she considered what had just been shared. It was nothing like what she had expected.

It broke her heart to hear, to even think about the pain that Mary had to know. She felt utterly awful for the young girl. No one deserved that sort of misery.



She had certainly known her fair share and couldn't imagine little Mary feeling anything like that. The young girl had to feel so alone after what had happened.

Celia knew in her heart that she had to do something to help her.

“H ello, Pastor Sam!”

Celia had just opened the door to the hall when she heard the children scrambling about to welcome the pastor. Loud footsteps thudded around the house.

Everyone sounded cheerful again, as though their tears had all been forgotten.

She swallowed hard. Taking a step into the hall, she meant to keep moving. But then she stopped and couldn't lift her feet.

This was really happening. Though she'd had a couple of months to seriously consider what she was doing in her communications with Brent, it had always seemed like the only option for her.

Though her parents would have let her stay with them for as long as she asked, she knew she couldn't stay forever. Was she supposed to ask her siblings if she could live with them?

Without Richard, she had no real hope of having a life on her own. It wasn't that she didn't want to be with her family, but she wanted to have her own.

That had always been her dream and her deepest desire.

Her thoughts turned to Richard. They had been together for years. She remembered all of the fun and wonderful memories they had shared.

For all of that time, she'd really thought she would spend the rest of her life with him. They had been through such pain and yet they could have still been together.

"Celia? Are you all right?"

Blinking, she looked over her shoulder to Annie Mae. The woman put a hand on her arm with a worried look on her face.

Though the last couple of months had been spent preparing for this moment, Celia still hesitated. She was jumping into a world—a life—that she hardly knew.

And she was taking every part of herself, good and bad, into it. What if she made a mistake?

It was hard to recover from all the pain she had been put through. Even as she searched for happiness, she knew there would always be rough spots on her heart.

Yet so much else could still go wrong along the way. No life was perfect, no matter who she married or what she did.

What would become of her in this world? Celia listened to the thumping of her heart as she tried to imagine all that would come next for them.

She worried about crying at night and upsetting Brent. She worried

about not being able to help with the children and how they might never take to her. What then?

Being married meant she would always do her best for her family. This was not a union she took lightly. Maybe Richard felt he had a right to tear them apart, but she would have stayed.

And now, she would stay for Brent and the children.

“Yes,” Celia responded at last.

The back door opened to reveal Brent. He was wearing a jacket now, she noticed, and his hair appeared combed. His eyes searched the house for a second before locating her.

Then the man smiled, making her heart skip a beat.

Any doubts she had experienced a moment ago now fled her mind.

Brent was a good man. He was kind, wise, and generous. It was clear that he was a good father and wanted to do right by everyone.

Then, there was Mary. All of the children needed someone more in their lives, and especially Mary.

Though Celia didn't know what she could do or how much she could really do for this family, she was going to do her best. She would love this family and spend her life treating them right.

“Let's get married,” Celia said. Her shoulders relaxed as she walked all the way over to the door. She heard Annie Mae following after.

The door was opened wider for them to step through.

There was a golden glow to the afternoon with the sun beginning its descent. It set a charming atmosphere on the porch, where everyone now stood waiting for her.

She nodded to the pastor, spotting a candy wrapper peeking out from his shirt pocket. Suppressing a smile, Celia glanced over to the others.

The children were gathered there, as well; most of them were dressed in their nicest Sunday clothes. All but Penelope were looking down at their shoes.

As though trying to hide behind Penelope, Mary was the only one still in her play clothes. Her hair was a mess and she had a big scowl on her face.

She was stubborn and strong. When the girl looked over at her, Celia gave her a small smile to let her know that all was well.

Maybe Mary didn't believe it now; someday, she would. Celia promised the two of them in that moment that she would do everything within her power to bring them peace.

As if knowing she was up to something, Mary scowled at her and then turned away.

"Ah, you must be the young lady. Pastor Sam Williams, at your service. We are glad to have you in our little town. And with the Calloway family," the pastor added.

He was fairly short, with a large belly and long nose. Though he was missing a few teeth, he offered up a charming smile and a hand to shake.

Celia turned to him with a forced smile. “Thank you, Pastor Sam. I’m glad to be here, as well. Thank you for coming out here to marry Brent and myself.”

“It’s the least I can do for you good people. Now, let us have this wedding. Come a little closer and we may begin.”

Though she was determined to make the best of her new home and family, the nerves didn’t go away as much as Celia had hoped. She felt her stomach churn as she shifted to stand before Brent.

He offered up a small bouquet of daisies that she gratefully accepted. A few stems were bent, but she was glad to have something to hold in her hands. That way, no one would see her shaking.

Still smiling, Celia did her best to stay upbeat and cheerful during the ceremony. She knew what to expect this time around.

It was strange to be doing this again in a new place surrounded by people she hardly knew, but she told herself this was all part of the adventure.

With time, she would look back and smile about all of this. They just needed some time.

The children behaved themselves.

She was both surprised and relieved, hopeful that this meant they didn’t mind. Though she wished they would be as hopeful as she was, she knew it would take a while.

And yet, she wasn’t completely alone.

Whenever she glanced down at the four children, Celia's gaze often returned to Penelope. There was a purple ribbon in her hair to match her dress.

The young girl was tall and thin for her age, and quite shy. It hadn't been that obvious before, but now it was for certain. Every now and then, the oldest girl would look up and smile.

She would only continue until Mary started to turn her way. When that happened, Penelope would drop her gaze and pretend this never happened.

"I do."

Celia fixed her gaze on Brent when the pastor turned to her.

She nodded, feeling her heart flutter before she made her own response. "I do."

"Then, by the power vested by the Lord, I pronounce the two of you husband and wife," Pastor Sam finished with a flourish.

A squeal sounded from behind Celia as Annie Mae began to clap. The woman cheered enthusiastically for them, not dampened a bit by how no one else was clapping.

From the corner of her eye, Celia noticed Penelope start to lift her hands in the air. A clap might have come from there had Mary not turned sharply to her sister with a scowl.

That seemed to kill the children's enthusiasm.

What was she supposed to do about this? Celia hesitated, trying to think of a solution. But she had never dealt with this particular

issue before.

All of her nieces and nephews loved her; they listened to her when she asked them to be kind to one another or stop arguing.

She couldn't recall her siblings and their spouses addressing this type of trouble, and she didn't want the sisters to hate one another.

Swallowing hard, Celia told herself that this would all take time. Though she didn't like the potential problems she was beginning to see already, she tried not to let that get to her.

They would all work together to find happiness. With some effort and love, she knew even Mary could welcome her presence in their home.

Hiding her dissatisfaction, Celia focused her attention back on Brent and hugged him. It was supposed to be a happy day for them.

Maybe it was all a little complicated, but that didn't have to stop them from being a little bit happy. They could enjoy this moment now before preparing for what might come next.

Eventually, everything would work out.

"I'm really glad you're here, Celia."

She turned back to see Brent standing there before her. He still had his hands on her elbows from their quick embrace. All of her worries faded with him smiling her way.

She searched his face to memorize every groove.



There were more freckles than she had noticed earlier. Feeling her heart warm, she couldn't help but smile in return.

They were married now. This was her husband.

She forgot all about her nerves about being married again. Thinking of his kind words from all of his letters, Celia found herself feeling hopeful about their future together.

He really was a good man. And the way he looked at her now was unlike anything she had ever known before.

Brent gazed into her eyes as though he could see right into her soul—and he liked what he saw. She wasn't sure Richard had ever looked at her like this.

It took her breath away and for a minute, she forgot her own name.

*Maybe this will work out after all,* Celia thought.

This was a new chance for all of them as a family to find happiness and love with one another. If Brent was there to support her, then she could do anything.

She would love these children and do whatever it took to support them, as well.

Maybe Mary didn't like her now, but they had the rest of their lives to learn and become friends. She could be patient.

And perhaps if she could befriend Penelope, and even the twins, then maybe she could win over Mary. It would take time, but it would be worth it.

They could be a happy family, Celia thought. She could feel it in her heart as she looked at Brent.

A world of hope and joy was set before their new little family. All they had to do now was take it.

**A**lthough Brent had been looking forward to bringing Celia there and having her join his family, he hadn't realized just how perfect it would feel.

He had missed being married.

Even as the pastor congratulated them and then left to return home for the evening, Brent hadn't been able to take his eyes off of Celia.

She was his wife and they were married. It almost felt too good to be true.

This wasn't the same joy he had felt when he'd first married Nicole. They had been young back then, young and curious and hopeful.

They hadn't known about all the battles they would face over their fourteen years of marriage. When the two of them were wed, they had been so eager to face life together.

Now, he was older. He and Celia were both wiser, having learned difficult lessons over the years. They had experienced pain and heartbreak that younger adults often never faced.

Trials had been overcome and some of their rougher edges had been smoothed out. The joy he'd felt was more comforting than exciting.

Brent rather liked that.

Such thrills could be left to the children. The twins chased each other around the house, even roping in Mary and Penelope.

He supposed he should have told them to go inside and change before dirtying their clothes, but his heart was full and he didn't particularly mind.

While the children played, he stood on the porch with Celia beside him. He couldn't resist glancing down at her to see if he could read what was going on inside her mind.

Hopefully, she was as happy to be there as he was for her.

But he glanced down and stiffened.

It was just a second, but an alarming second, when he looked down and thought he saw Nicole in his arms. This surprised Brent and left him speechless for a minute.

His heart hammered in his chest as he tried to understand what had happened.

Brent considered the similarities carefully. They both had light hair, though Celia's was lighter. Celia's was also much longer and curly; Nicole's hair had always been so straight.

He remembered how she used to run her hands through his curls when she was feeling particularly jealous.

So, there were a few ways in which the women looked similar. But not enough, he told himself sternly, that he would ever mix them up.

Warmth flooded his chest when he thought of these wonderful women. It had been difficult for him to imagine ever remarrying. But Brent was glad now that he was with Celia.

There was something so sweet and kind about her. Though he had started this day extremely anxiously, he was beginning to feel better about it.

He clapped loudly and called out to the children. "Come inside, everyone! Let's eat supper."

Everyone cheered. Giggling beside him, Celia tucked her arm in close to his. He felt her hair brush against his shoulder as the two of them led the way inside.

Brent had a feeling that he would never forget how beautiful his new wife was.

"I'm starving," she murmured in his ear. The softness of her voice made his heart skip a beat. "What shall we eat this evening?"

"A feast," he answered her.

Everyone worked together to set up the food he had prepared earlier that morning.

Worried about how long everything would take, Brent had seen to it that enough food was put together so all they needed to do was heat up a few items before sitting together as a family.

He took his seat and felt like he was beginning to relax for the first time in years. Penelope was smiling while the twins giggled about what Celia was saying to them.

“Look, when you pinch your rolls just so, they look like little rabbits. Now they can hop all the way around your table before they land in your mouth,” she announced with her bread before taking a bite.

“I want a rabbit!” Lily cried out eagerly.

Brent sat back in his seat as he watched them interact. The twins were slowly coming out of their shells with their new stepmother and it was a beautiful thing to watch.

This was all he wanted. The first year after losing his wife had been spent trying to convince himself that she was never going to return.

That wasn’t the type of miracle that he would get in his life and he had to learn how to move on. Just as he had begun to grasp this, the loneliness had set in.

And then, there was Celia.

She straightened up in her chair beside him with a soft gasp. “Oh! I nearly forgot. Goodness. Pardon me, everyone. I forgot that I brought each of you something from Boston. Where’s my bag?”

Glancing around the table, Brent suppressed a smile as he watched the children exchange curious looks. They hadn’t been too receptive to her jokes but they had listened to everything she said.

Their eyes followed Celia while she left the table and went into the

hall where her bags were set. Everyone could hear her hum a few notes; he could see her when he tilted his head, watching as she opened up her large bag and then hurried back to the table.

“I suppose I could have waited until later, but I don’t think I could wait any longer. You’ll just have to be careful with the rest of your food on your plate.

“Here are gifts that I have brought each of you,” Celia explained. Her arms were full as she went around the table to share the items.

Sitting there, Brent watched curiously.

He hadn’t asked her to bring them anything. Just coming as herself was more than enough for him, enough for the family. Having her there by his side was all the gift that he needed.

However, he supposed that may not be the case with the children.

Brent watched Celia’s broad, hopeful smile and then studied the hesitant looks on the four kids. They hardly knew what to make of this entire situation.

Though he didn’t blame them for this, he did wish they would be a little kinder.

Should he have brought out those handkerchiefs? They were still in his chest, now that he thought of them.

Drumming his fingers on the edge of the table, Brent wished he could do something more for Celia. She was trying so hard to be happy and kind and generous.

Much of it was clearly natural; but, surely, she had to be hesitant.

For a second, he attempted to imagine what it would be like traveling to the other side of the land to marry someone he didn't know and to be a parent to their children.

His gratitude and respect for Celia continued to grow.

"I don't want a doll," Liam told Celia plainly when she made her way around the table to him.

"No?" she asked politely with a small smile. "How did I guess that? Don't worry, Liam. I don't have a doll for you.

"But I do have a bag of marbles. I heard you're quite good with them. Is that true?"

"Yes!" Liam practically snatched the leather pouch so he could start digging around in there to see what he had just been given.

Clearing his throat, Brent gave the boy a pointed look before shaking his head. His son could sort through his new gift later. If the marbles spilled out, they would end up everywhere.

Though Liam wasn't happy about it, he grudgingly closed the pouch back up for later.

Liam had his marbles and all three girls had dolls.

They were well-made, from the little that Brent knew about dolls. He recalled how he had seen some in the window of a shop a few months back.

Most likely, one of the girls had pointed it out and he had looked, only to tell them that they didn't have the money or the time for another doll.



Now, Lily and Penelope looked thrilled with their gifts.

Looking over their dolls carefully, they touched the lace fabric and the yarn that made the eyelashes. He saw the smiles creeping over their faces. The sight warmed his heart.

Surely now they would understand what he saw in Celia.

It might have worked, had Mary not looked around at them and frowned.

“No!”

“Mary,” Brent started gently.

But he was too far to do anything when Mary threw the cloth and yarn doll to the ground. He was relieved it wasn’t made of anything breakable.

“I don’t want your doll. I’m not getting rid of Patience!”

He stood up, growing impatient with her antics. Hadn’t he made himself clear that Celia was there to stay? His daughter was smart but she could certainly be stubborn.

And now she was behaving more terribly than usual. He was tired of her moods and just wanted her to be kind. Why couldn’t she just behave herself?

“Mary, that’s no way to thank Celia for such a nice gift.” The words came out more harshly than he had intended. “Pick it back up.”

The young girl just crossed her arms and frowned. “No. I don’t want a new doll! I didn’t ask for one and I don’t need one. I like

my old doll just fine!”

Stuck in between them at the table, Celia looked back and forth at each of them. He couldn't see her face but could tell she felt apprehensive.

“Oh, that's all right. Mary, I didn't mean anything like that. You don't need to get rid of your old doll.”

“No new dolls!” Mary shouted before hurrying off to her room.

She was gone before Brent could speak up. His mouth turned dry as he struggled to keep his composure.

Mary had been nothing but frustrating all day. The talk he had given her when she first ran away from Celia had clearly had no effect on her.

The frustration was exhausting because it melded with the uncertainty of this situation. It was so new to him and Celia; they were in a precarious situation that he didn't want to ruin for them.

Everything needed to be going perfectly to keep her there and wanting to stay with them. But that couldn't happen if his daughter chased her away.

Why would someone care to stay for a family who treated her this poorly?

He swallowed hard and tried to think.

Raising children was hard on a normal day, but lately, it felt impossible. Brent pulled himself together. He needed to do something. But what?

**S**lamming the door shut behind her, Mary hurriedly climbed onto her bed and grabbed up her doll.

The doll was made of soft cloth that had worn out over the last couple of years. The colors had begun to fade and the buttons for her eyes had grown loose.

But this was Mary's doll. This was Patience.

Her chest heaved as she curled up into a ball. Closing her eyes, Mary told herself that everything was going to be fine. Now that she had Patience, everything would be better.

Her doll used to do that for her about everything. All she had to do now was hold it tight, so she did. She squeezed Patience so tightly that it hurt.

Curled up this small, she could almost block out the rest of the world around her.

Mary didn't want to be there, or anywhere near Celia. She supposed the woman's last name was now the same as hers, but she didn't want to think about that.

She just wanted Celia to go away and to have her mother back. Was that really so hard?

Sniffing, she felt the familiar itch come to her eyes. Tears were threatening to fall, annoying her.

There had been so many tears over the last couple of years. She was tired of crying but didn't imagine it ever ending. How could it? Her mother was no longer by her side to comfort her.

It was her mother who had given her the doll.

Nearly four years ago, she remembered the occasion vaguely. She'd suffered from an awful fever around Christmastime.

The other children had played out in the snow and strung popcorn on string while she'd been sick in bed. Her mother had put blankets upon blankets over her, trying to keep her warm.

Nothing had seemed to help.

This had worried her parents dearly. Though she didn't recall what they had said, if they had indeed said anything to her, she knew they had been very worried about her.

They hadn't let her siblings come into the room for fear of them catching the fever, as well. A week had passed where she'd felt like her insides were on fire.

Most of the time, she was alone. It was only at night when her mother came into the room to stay with her to give her comfort.

This was the only thing Mary could look forward to during that ordeal. She remembered feeling lonely and sad during her sickness.

She had been so miserable then. Every part of her, inside and out, had ached.

One day, when she was feeling particularly awful, her mother had brought her the doll. It was her mother who had given it the name ‘Patience.’

*“You’ll get better,”* her mother had assured her. *“She’ll be here every step of the way, just like me.”*

With her eyes closed, Mary tried to remember everything else her mother had said to her. It took effort for her to be able to recall just what her mother’s voice sounded like.

She slowly remembered how her mother had said everything would be all right, no matter what. She had also said Patience would protect her.

Those words had been magic back then.

A soft sigh escaped Mary’s lips. She recalled how she had been able to sleep peacefully through the night when she was first given Patience.

For the first time in days, she had slept all the way until morning.

Her mother had brought her comfort. When she was being held, Mary hadn’t been scared of what might happen during her illness.

She was just grateful for the opportunity to be so close to her mother.

Sniffing, Mary rubbed her nose. A tear made its way down her cheek before she could prevent it. She didn’t want that. She was

tired of tears and feeling awful.

Why couldn't she be happy?

She fumbled with a soft piece of yarn that was part of Patience's hair. It was a soft brown color that was just a few shades darker than her mother's hair.

Part of her worried about the doll falling apart, being played with so frequently, but she couldn't bring herself to stop. Just holding Patience brought her comfort that she couldn't seem to find anywhere else.

Maybe she might have had that with her mother, but her mother was gone.

It was a painful reminder that often stopped Mary in her tracks. There were still moments in the day when she expected to turn the corner and see her mother right there.

But she never appeared. Again and again, Mary was reminded of the pain and the heartache.

Her mother was never coming back. It seemed all she had of the woman was this soft doll. Just the thought of losing Patience brought tears to her eyes.

She couldn't ever let something like that happen. She would keep her doll forever so she never forgot about her mother.

"You can't stop me," Mary mumbled through her partially-open lips.

There was no one else in the room, but she knew she was talking

to Celia and that was enough.

Mary had hoped this was all some sort of awful joke or nightmare. But that had proven to not be the case.

She had a red welt on her forearm from repeatedly pinching herself so that she could wake up. It never worked, so this had to be her life whether she wanted it to be or not.

Her father had really brought a strange woman into the house. Celia, whoever she was, had decided that she would be their mother.

That was not going to happen, Mary promised herself.

First, the woman had come to replace her mother. Now, the doll.

Though she had considered giving the woman a chance, she knew that wasn't possible now.

Celia was crazy and cruel; all she wanted to do was make Mary replace Patience with a doll that didn't mean anything to anyone.

She held the doll close to her chest. The smaller she made herself on the bed, the more she believed that no one could hurt her.

A few more tears fell before she could pull herself together. Even as she did, that didn't keep the pain away completely.

She couldn't stop thinking about how she might have lost one of the few things she had to remind herself of her mother.

There was no way she could ever give up Patience.

Sniffing, Mary promised herself that she would never lose this doll. Patience meant so much to her. She cherished the doll and tried to be delicate so the yarn wouldn't crumble.

It hurt to even think that Patience might fall apart. If she did, then it would be her fault—just like it was her fault that her mother was no longer with them.

“I won't let your memory die,” she whispered into the empty room.



Celia woke up early the next morning, just before the sun rose.

Usually, when she awoke so early, she would try to close her eyes again and get some more rest. She had spent plenty of time in bed resting in the past, finding it comforting and cozy.

Not particular about mattresses or blankets, she merely wished to rest her head.

But this morning was different.

She opened her eyes and felt wide awake straight away. Clutching her blankets, she looked around her room in curiosity.

Light poured in from the nearby window. There were curtains, certainly, but they were thin and she could make out much of the scenery from where she was.

They did nothing to block out the sunlight. She couldn't help but wonder if she minded; they looked quite beautiful.

This was her new bedroom. Beside her, still fast asleep, was Brent.

His hair looked even more unruly from this angle; she smiled and looked away so she wouldn't wake him.

They had talked late into the night before dozing off, and she wanted him to get more rest if he could manage it.

Slowly slipping out from beneath the blankets, Celia stood up. Her bare feet were chilled on the floor as she stood and stretched.

Her nightgown brushed lightly against the ground. It was quiet as a whisper, which she was glad for. She really didn't want to wake Brent.

With every second she was up and alert, Celia found herself growing more anxious.

Waking up had been nice, but only for a moment. She dropped her arms down to her side before rubbing her hands together.

Turning her eyes toward the doorway, she wondered if any of the children had awoken yet. She could imagine all of them already awake, waiting and wondering what she was going to do next.

Celia told herself that she was being silly.

And yet that didn't stop her from starting to worry. There were moments when she felt that she was finally convincing some of the children to like her.

She had made most of them laugh a few times the evening before. Then, Liam had even let her help him get ready for bed.

It made her heart twist.

While she felt strongly for all the pain they had been through, she also felt excited at getting to know them. She just wanted to have a chance to be a mother.

Would they give her that opportunity? Even more so, would they ever like her?

Swallowing hard, Celia told herself that such a thing couldn't happen if she stood there all day.

She dressed and quietly stepped out of the bedroom. Every part of her felt wide awake as she made her way into the kitchen and started to look around at everything the family had.

Brent had taken a few minutes the night before to show her where some important items might be. While they had various pots hanging on the wall beside the stove and the fireplace, there were a few hidden shelves and cupboards where everything else was kept.

It was a bright room with even more sunlight than her bedroom. This was a beautiful place to live, Celia marveled, twice as lovely as the small home she had shared a while back with Richard.

Her parents' house was bigger, but it lacked the warmth of this place.

Could she be happy there forever? She hoped so.

Humming quietly, Celia found a small collection of recipes in one of the cabinets. She rifled through them curiously.

Her mother had raised her and her sisters to memorize everything they might need to know about baking, including recipes, so she

hadn't used any written instructions for a long time.

"Beautiful handwriting," she murmured.

The last one caught her eye. It was a breakfast dish that sounded perfectly delicious, with biscuits and sausage and gravy. Just thinking about it made her mouth water.

She had thought about making pancakes, a special treat she'd felt certain everyone would enjoy, but decided to try this instead.

Besides, Celia thought to herself, the family might enjoy eating something more familiar rather than her own recipe.

She nodded to herself and set the piece of paper down. Once she had taken a deep breath, she began to pull out the ingredients.

Grateful that Brent had shown her the icebox beneath the porch already, she found some beef that she brought out and set over a low fire. Then, the biscuits were baked and she set them in the proper pan.

Though she had tried hard to follow recipes before, Celia double- and triple-checked everything so that none of this would go wrong. She wanted to make everyone smile that morning.

This included Mary.

She knew it would be difficult connecting with the young girl, but she was hopeful. And having a full belly certainly had never hurt anyone.

The longer she spent in the kitchen, the more hopeful Celia grew about this. It was a new day filled with new opportunities.

They had already gotten the hard, awkward part of meeting one another out of the way. She began to consider topics to discuss, as well as perhaps some games she could invite the children to play.

“Perfect,” she murmured as she set the dish into the oven.

Setting the towel over her shoulder, she inhaled deeply. The food was almost done and soon everyone would wake up.

Brent had told her the night before that they typically arose around the same time to get their day started. But to do this, he had to help wake them up so they would actually get moving.

All of the children helped with the duties of the ranch before doing anything else.

She just hoped they were hungry.

Besides, maybe it was a comforting food to the family; that could be why it had been written down. Maybe they enjoyed it frequently.

The table was set and soon the food was set out. Everything smelled delicious and she prayed that this would work out well.

The children were going through so much for their young ages. Wanting to make this transition as easy as possible, Celia was willing to do whatever it took to help them adjust.

She'd also left a few extra biscuits out on a plate before adding cinnamon to a small bowl of butter. That was a trick her mother had taught her a few years ago.

It had been a favorite treat of Richard's.

Celia shook her head to force the man out of her mind. He was gone, far away, and out of her life. They had spent many years together but now it was all for naught.

Her husband had practically disappeared in order to not share a life with her any longer. The thought hurt, but she told herself that it didn't have to anymore.

After all, she wasn't with him or in Boston any longer.

She rubbed her hands together once the dish was out of the oven.

It was covered with a towel to keep it warm. There was no way she would risk ruining this when she had worked so hard to prepare this meal.

Rolling her sleeves back down, she made her way to her bedroom. Her husband would be getting up soon. Celia put her hand on the door and opened it.

"Oh," she blurted when she saw Brent.

He was sorting through their wardrobe for something to wear. Though he had his pants laced and his boots on, he was missing a shirt.

Brent was in his thirties and still had the body of a young man.

She had noticed the broad shoulders and saw the muscles beneath his sleeves from what he wore the day before, but she hadn't considered the strong, thick build that had been there all along.

The hall was growing warm.

Celia wasn't a stranger to a husband or a man's body. She had been married for several years, after all. And yet she couldn't stop the blush as it crept up her cheeks.

Hurriedly averting her gaze, she stumbled through her apology. "Oh, dear. I'm sorry about that. This, I mean. I didn't know... I didn't think about knocking."

She thought she heard him hesitate. But before she could look up and see for herself, she heard a throaty chuckle escape Brent's lips.

That did nothing to help the blush, making her heart skip a beat.

What had just come over her?

Though she enjoyed what she had learned of him in his letters and was relieved to find him to be a good man upon meeting him, Celia hadn't anticipated to feel such strong emotions.

Her stomach felt as though she had filled it with a dozen butterflies.

"It's all right," Brent said. She blinked hard, trying to keep track of his words. "We're married, aren't we? I don't mind.

"I'm just sorry I woke up so late. I'm usually awake a little sooner than this. The cows won't be happy about it."

As he changed the subject, she nodded. She lifted her gaze back up to him to see that he had found himself a shirt. Celia pushed aside the disappointment.

"It's all right. We all had a rather big day yesterday, did we not? You can take care of the cows and I'll tend to the children," she

offered.

Brent looked over at her. She could read his face clearly right then: relief and hesitation. “That would be great. Are you certain about that?”

They talked for a few more minutes before Celia assured him that she could do this on her own. Together, they walked to the back door where he disappeared down the trail.

She paused to fix the settings on the table before going down the hall.

Knocking on the twins’ door, she waited a moment before slowly opening it up. “Good morning. Lily, Liam? It’s time to get up, children. Would you like any help?”

It took her a minute to convince them that they really were awake and not dreaming about having to get up for the day. The twins grudgingly slid out of their beds before moving about to dress.

She waited a moment to make sure that they weren’t about to fall back into bed. Once Celia felt certain that this wouldn’t happen, she moved on to the next room.

This one made her pause. She didn’t want Mary to hate her.

Sighing, she mustered up her courage to knock on the door. When she didn’t hear anything, she peeked her head in.

“Good morning, Mary. Good morning, Penelope.”

Though she was about to say more, Celia paused when she realized that the second bed was both empty and neatly made. She



frowned.

Glancing around the room to make sure she wasn't imagining this, she hesitantly turned to the other bed.

"Mary? Mary, where is Penelope?"

The young girl grunted before putting her pillow over her head. It was rather dramatic but potentially effective, as well.

"I know you can hear me," Celia said. She worked hard to keep her voice calm and bright while she spoke.

"Good morning, Mary. Please hurry up and dress for the day. Food is ready and we'll eat when your father returns from milking the cows."

Mary just grunted.

Resolved to not upset her, Celia gingerly stepped away from the door. She rubbed her hands together as she searched through the house to find Penelope.

Had the girl wandered off while she was cooking? What had happened?

She was just about to start panicking when she looked out the window and noticed a small figure on the porch.

Celia hurried out the back door. It was there that she found Penelope. The young girl was already dressed with her hair brushed for the day. On top of that, Penelope had a book in her hands.

“Good morning, Penelope,” Celia rang out. “I was looking all over for you.”

The twelve-year-old hardly glanced up at her. “Huh? Oh. I’m just reading.”

Crouching down to her level, Celia tilted her head and smiled. “Poetry by Tennyson? Oh, I haven’t read his work in a long time.

“I hope you don’t mind my interrupting you. How are you enjoying the book?”

“It’s good, but I think I prefer Shakespeare. Do you read, too?” Penelope asked after a pause.

“I do. But only when I can, which has not been often. But when I was back in Boston, a while ago, I used to work in a bookstore.

“I loved it very much, you know. I’ve always loved reading. Which poem are you reading now?”

To her delight—though Celia tried hard to muffle it—the young girl eagerly dove into conversation about poetry. This thrilled Celia for numerous reasons.

She was finally beginning to bond with some of the children. It was a brilliant feeling being able to talk with Penelope, and even more so that they were discussing bookos.

Did Penelope really like her?

She tried not to get her hopes up, but that was practically impossible. Warmth soared through her and made her fingertips and toes tingle.

She had no desire to go back to the house for want of keeping this moment going.

But it was time for them to eat breakfast. Sighing, Celia stood up and then offered her hand to Penelope.

“Come, now. Everyone else is going to start wondering what happened to us. Besides, I’m sure you must be hungry,” Celia added.

“Did I hear something about food?”

Penelope climbed to her feet and the two of them turned to find Brent coming up the path. He wore a cheerful grin on his face and carried two filled pails of milk.

Standing there, Celia watched as his daughter welcomed him with a hug and then attempted to help by picking up one of the buckets.

“Thank you,” Brent said with a smile. “How about I handle this today and you can do it tomorrow?”

The three of them exchanged grins before making their way inside. They had arrived at the perfect time. Celia hurried over to the table just as the twins took their seats.

Everyone had come around and now it was time to eat.

Smiling hopefully, she tugged off the towel to reveal the delicious-looking dish. “Ta da! I hope you don’t mind, but I thought everyone might like to...”

Celia trailed off when she noticed the shocked expressions on everyone's faces. Though Penelope stiffened at the table and Mary’s

gaze narrowed, it was Brent's reaction that worried Celia the most.

He looked so stunned. Then she couldn't tell if he stepped away from her on accident or purpose.

It was clear that something had gone wrong. But what?

"I...." Swallowing hard, she backtracked through her mind to consider if she had forgotten something from the recipe. "It was just.... Food. I thought everyone might enjoy this one."

"I'm not hungry," Mary announced in a huff. Once she had thrown a nasty look in Celia's direction, she jumped up. "I don't want to eat anymore."

Off she went, no one knowing what to do.

Celia opened her mouth and struggled to find something to say. After all her hard work, that was all she would get? It felt as though they all had a secret that they wouldn't share with her.

She looked around their faces for a clue to explain what was going on.

Brent cleared his throat before quietly speaking up. "We all know this dish. It was their mother's favorite. I never made it, so... we haven't had this since she passed."

Hearing his words, Celia felt something cold run down her spine. She had messed up in a terrible, awful manner. Her mouth slowly opened in shock.

What had she done? Thinking about all this meant to this family, she was horrified.

She should have asked. She should have done something so this couldn't happen. Looking around their faces, Celia felt her heart breaking.

She had just reminded everyone of the pain they had all gone through already.

How could she be so foolish?

Tears stung her eyes. She straightened up and blinked them away. She couldn't let anyone here watch her cry. "I see. I didn't... I didn't know... Pardon me."

She needed air.

A lump formed in her throat. Celia hurried out of the kitchen. The cozy, well-lit room had become too much for her.

She went outside, hiding in the shade of the roof, while she considered what she had just done. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply.

How could she have messed up so badly?

**L**ooking around at everyone in the kitchen, Brent tried to think of something to say.

The shock was slowly wearing off. Though the lump in his throat remained, he was gathering his bearings. His heart pounded in his chest while he tried to look anywhere but at the table.

It was just food. A simple meal that had been prepared countless times over the years back when life was easier for all of them.

He told himself that it didn't matter. It shouldn't have mattered because it shouldn't mean anything.

There had been moments when he'd thought about making the dish, keeping the recipe for the day he changed his mind.

But nothing had prepared him for the wave of grief that crashed over him.

The children had clearly been affected, as well.

Even the twins, though they hardly remembered their mother, sat awkwardly at the table without touching anything. They knew

something was wrong and waited for someone to help them through this.

All of this felt like an uncomfortably cold leech pressed against his skin. His eyes scanned the room, looking at each of the children.

Celia was gone, leaving the little family altogether. She had disappeared through the front door without anyone stopping her.

A lump formed in his throat as he realized that he should have gone to Celia. This was a terrible incident, but she couldn't have known.

He took one step toward the front door before pausing. After all, she wasn't the only one who had fled the room.

Though he wanted to reach out to his new wife, he felt tethered to his children.

Mary, too, had run off; she was young and willful and twice as confused as Celia. This meant he needed to take care of her first.

Clearing his throat, he glanced at the children still there. Penelope was looking at him now, silently asking him to do something.

"Stay here," he said at last. "And eat. Or clean up. Or something, I don't know. I—I'll be right back."

Brent hesitantly started off toward the bedroom, where he found the window open. His daughter had a penchant for using those instead of doors on occasion.

Sighing, he turned around to head back outside. He made his way over to the animals in search of his daughter. She had to be around

there somewhere.

There were times he feared that she would start running and never stop. But, fortunately, she had never gone too far.

And there she was, clinging to the fence while petting the sheep.

Her favorite sheep was right there beside her. It was older, ornery, and cross-eyed.

The poor creature could have been put out of his misery the other year, but Mary had strongly insisted that the sheep wasn't in any pain and deserved a long life.

"Mary."

Mary huffed, not bothering to turn around to acknowledge him. But he heard her mutter under her breath.

Still feeling a lot of emotions on his shoulders, Brent tried to push his grief back into the corner so that he could focus on this time with his daughter.

She needed him, whether she knew it or not.

They all needed each other.

Quickly, he thought about what he was going to say to her. His footsteps led him over to her side and he leaned against the fence to study the sheep.

Most of the time, he was too busy to just stand there and watch the world around them. He looked down at the small creatures, wondering if they ever worried about anything. He doubted it.



Glancing down beside him, he saw the top of Mary's head. She hadn't brushed her hair yet. Her dress was a little wrinkled. And she was clearly trying her hardest not to look up at him.

"Mary, we need to talk," Brent said after a long, drawn-out moment.

He wasn't sure what he expected his daughter to say, if anything. They used to talk all the time.

Kids liked to share everything they learned; he could remember how much Mary used to tell him. She would talk about everything she was doing in the moment and after the moment.

She had lost her voice several times when she was younger because of all the talking she used to do. But that had all changed when Nicole died.

His throat constricted. Attempting to clear his mind, Brent wondered what she would say about all of this. How would she handle Mary's moods?

What was he supposed to do to fix this and connect with his daughter?

Wishing for help, he thought of Celia.

Brent swallowed. He glanced back down at his daughter and then sighed.

"You were rude to Celia," he told her. "Again. This can't keep happening, you know."

Another huff escaped her lips. Mary had always been an

opinionated young girl. For as long as he could remember, she had always known what she wanted.

There was only so much that he had ever been allowed to do to help her because of this. It felt like one of those times again, and he hated that.

“Mary, I mean it. I know we’re going through a lot as a family. Losing your mother wasn’t easy on any of us. But that doesn’t give us the right to be mean to Celia.

“She came all this way for us. That means you, too.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t ask her to.”

“No, but I did. And I’m not taking it back. I have meant everything I said to her, just like I have meant everything I have said to you and your brothers and sisters.

“Celia deserves to be treated well, and that won’t happen if you’re saying things like that to her all the time. She worked hard to prepare that food for us,” he added pointedly.

Still not looking up at him, Mary shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t ask her to.”

“That’s beside the point,” he retorted.

Then she suddenly snapped, anger in her words. “She didn’t have a right to do that. It’s Mama’s recipe.

“Celia can’t just walk in here and make that food and do whatever she wants! That isn’t fair.”

“Celia didn’t know that the recipe meant anything to us,” he told her firmly. It was hard to remain calm but he did his best. “She’s just trying to be nice to everyone.

“Besides, isn’t it nice to have something actually delicious for breakfast?”

It was meant to be something of a joke to lighten the tension between them.

He knew Mary was strong-minded, and he wanted to ease the pain in whatever way he could.

But that didn’t seem to be how Mary saw it. His daughter sniffled loudly.

As he crouched down to her level, he saw the first tear fall. She couldn’t hide from him then, nor stop the tears. She clung to the post while she talked to him in a softer, sadder tone.

“I don’t care about that. I’ll eat dirt,” Mary cried. “But I want Celia to leave! Please, Papa. I don’t want her here. I want Mama. I miss her so badly.”

Reaching out, he attempted to embrace her. There was no reason for a child to have to cry alone. He felt the tightness return to his chest and he wished he could take all of her pain away.

For a minute, she let him hug her.

“It’s all right,” Brent said in a quiet, soothing voice. “I promise. I understand. I miss her, too, every day.

“But we don’t have to always be sad. I’m certain that, with time,

you will grow to like Celia. She's..."

Mary wrenched herself free.

She looked at him as though he had just betrayed her. His arms were suddenly empty. With his mouth still open, he tried to think of something to say to salvage the situation.

But it was too late.

"What? No. No, that is never going to happen! I don't want to like Celia, Papa. I don't want to like her because I don't want her to stay. She doesn't belong here.

"She's not really part of this family and she cannot—never, ever—replace Mama!" Mary cried out.

He was left crouched there while his daughter hopped over the fence and hurried over to hide out among the sheep. She knew he wouldn't chase her in there, leaving her free to cry alone.

Slowly dropping his arms back down at his side, Brent struggled to keep his composure after what she'd just said.

This was not what he had hoped for from her. Following her with his gaze, he couldn't help but feel deeply wounded. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat. It didn't work.

Taking a shaky breath, he straightened up and leaned on the post for support.

Was it supposed to be this hard?

Biting his tongue, Brent tried to keep control of his emotions. He

considered what his daughter had just said and wondered if he could have done something better to handle this situation.

It just felt like he was failing. He was failing Celia, himself, and the children. Everything seemed so complicated and difficult lately.

Brent ran a hand through his hair as he tried to think of something that he could do. Surely, he could handle this situation, one way or another.

He had to.

Just having Celia there was clearly going to be twice as hard as he could have expected. He let out a deep breath and closed his eyes.

A soft breeze brushed by him in the quiet moment. It ruffled his hair and tickled his neck. Rubbing his bare skin, Brent sighed.

No matter how hard it was dealing with the kids, he had to do something. It wasn't like he could give up on his children.

Yet, Celia was another matter.

She didn't know his children and they hardly knew each other. Only now did he feel that he was beginning to understand the insurmountable challenge before them.

He closed his eyes and wondered what he could do about her.

While he knew she had to be upset and knew that she had a right to feel upset, he wasn't sure how to remedy this with her.

Clearly, his children were going to be a challenge during this change in their lives.

So, was Celia up to the challenge?

And if not, Brent worried, what were they to do?

They had just been married. He wanted this to work. But the fear climbed inside him as he wondered if these problems could tear them apart.

Pacing around in the shade, Celia rubbed her hands over her arms.

It had been several minutes and yet she didn't feel any better. Everything was still a mess.

Even if she did start to feel better, she worried that it wouldn't actually fix anything; then, it would most likely only get worse all over again.

"How could I be so wrong?" Celia asked herself.

Her mind was still reeling over what had happened with her breakfast.

That house wasn't hers. The family wasn't hers. Just because she had married Brent last night didn't mean that this life was hers.

Nothing felt right. She ran her fingers through her hair. It felt greasy. Her dress felt too stiff.

As one thing went wrong, everything else did, as well. The more she thought about this, the darker her thoughts became.

Looking down, she found sunshine glinting off the tips of her boots.

The lump in her throat that she had thought had gone away came back with a vengeance, making it hard for her to breathe. Struggling to swallow, she made her way into the sunlight.

She kept moving until she had reached the edge of the pond.

It looked so calm. Perfectly calm, as though it couldn't be touched by the world.

Celia wished that was her. She wanted to be untouchable and graceful and never upset by the world. But how could she do any of that when she was ruining everything for everyone else?

She slowly wiped the tears from her cheeks. It felt ridiculous to hurt when she knew the family was hurting so much.

She was just so terribly ashamed to have made such a big mistake. What had she been thinking?

This was supposed to have fixed things for her.

Coming out here to join Brent and the children was supposed to help her heal and build a better life. She wanted to start anew to create the family she had always wanted.

There was a husband now, and children—the children she had always wanted.

But they hated her.

Maybe she wasn't supposed to have children. It was clear that her



body would never give her the opportunity, though she didn't understand why.

All these years and she had tried so hard. Where had she gone wrong?

Her thoughts spun to her nieces and nephews. For years, she'd thought she could be like her brothers and sisters and have families like theirs.

It had seemed like an innocent desire. Didn't all young girls want to grow up and have families of their own? She didn't understand why this dream was so hard to make come true.

Surely, this wasn't so impossible because so many other women had this.

"Where did I go wrong?" she asked the world.

A breeze fluttered by, tugging lightly on her hair.

There was, perhaps, a reason why she wasn't a mother until this very moment. The universe seemed to be saying that she wasn't supposed to be one.

God could know something that she clearly didn't. Did He know what a terrible mother she would be?

It hurt to breathe. She took a shaky breath before realizing how weak her legs felt. Hastily, she sat down on the ground. The grass was rather damp, but she didn't care. None of it mattered.

She closed her eyes, thinking back several years ago when she hadn't yet felt the misery of her failures that held her captive now.

*Married just that afternoon, Richard couldn't keep his hands off her.*

*If their fingers weren't intertwined, he had a grasp around her waist or her shoulders. The intimacy made Celia blush.*

*She loved every second of it, hardly able to pull her gaze from his beautiful face.*

*They were married. After all this time, they were finally married. The thought made her heart pound loudly in her chest.*

*It had been the one thing on her mind for months, the chance to spend the rest of her life with the man she loved dearest. This brought her more joy than she could have possibly imagined.*

*"Come with me," Richard murmured in her ear.*

*His breath tickled her skin, making her giggle as she clung to him tightly so he could lead her out the side door.*

*The festivities with their families had begun. Both of them had at least five siblings, so the house was overflowing into the yard in the back.*

*But Richard led her toward the street.*

*"Where are we going?" Celia asked him. She was blind to the world when they were together. They were young and married and everything was right. She felt invincible.*

*"Just out," he explained. "I'm tired of sharing you with everyone. Don't we belong to each other now?"*

*His words made her smile shine. Staying close to her husband—a word she was all too eager to use—she could already imagine the rest of their*

*lives together.*

*It was going to be wonderful. Richard had just purchased them the sweetest little house. She had spent all of last week stitching curtains to decorate her new home with him.*

*Having never left her parents', she was excited about this new life she was starting. A new house, a new kitchen, a new everything. T*

*here was even an extra room that would be perfect for their eventual nursery.*

*"I don't think I could be any happier than I am right now," she told her husband.*

*Looking around the street, she wondered if everyone could tell they were just married. She wore her favorite dress and had spent all morning braiding her hair just right.*

*"And just think, Richard. We have the rest of our lives to be together."*

*He paused to kiss her forehead. "Yes, we do."*

*"It will be wonderful, won't it? Lots of love and laughter and children?" she asked hopefully.*

*Any uncertainty she had was immediately erased with his low, attractive chuckle.*

*"Of course, Celia. Anything you want for the rest of our lives. It's you and me."*

*Burying her face in her hands, Celia found herself crying all alone as she tried to understand what she had done to deserve this pain.*

She had tried to be nice and kind to those around her. Growing up, she had helped to raise her siblings and often knitted for the poor houses.

All she had done was try to love those around her. But even then, she couldn't seem to do that right.

Her thoughts were spiraling.

Celia had been at this point before. It had happened after every miscarriage as she wept and begged for something to change. But she failed again and again.

She couldn't get used to it. And the more she failed, the more alone she found herself.

Did God want her to suffer like this?

It didn't make any sense to her. It never did. She continued to search for answers, and it had brought her some solace with the miscarriages.

But this? There were four children inside that house who needed a mother. That much was obvious.

However, it felt like a slap in the face, how badly she had already failed them. She wanted this so badly, yet she had only made everything worse for everyone.

So caught up in her emotions, it took Celia a moment to realize she was no longer alone.

The footsteps had been dampened by the grass, but there was a soft rustling beside her. Glancing through her fingers, she found

Brent taking a seat beside her on the ground.

Embarrassment set in on top of all the other emotions. Straightening up, Celia sniffled as she tried to wipe her tears away. She wondered what he was thinking and what he might say to her.

Would he tell her to leave? Perhaps she was no good as a wife as well as a mother.

A shaky sigh escaped her lips. "I'm sorry," Celia started.

Before she could go on, Brent reached out to rest a hand gently on her arm. She could see a grim smile on his face through her tears.

"It's all right. That was an honest mistake; you couldn't have known. It's us who should be apologizing to you for the way you've been treated.

"I'm sorry about Mary's behavior. She's a sweet girl most of the time. Life has just been, well, hard for the last couple of years," he explained in a gentle tone.

She managed a jerky nod. "I know. I know, I cannot imagine. It's just that... I don't even know what to do.

"How am I supposed to fix anything if everything I do could make everyone so upset? I don't want to do that to anyone."

"It's all right," he insisted. "We'll figure it out. We knew it wouldn't be easy at first, remember? Mary is just a tricky girl. She's sweet and fiery and really afraid.

"Now, I know it's going to take some time, but soon, I know Mary will see how amazing you are. She just needs a chance."

For a second, she thought about how he had just called her amazing.

Brent was trying to comfort her, making generous and thoughtful statements. More than anything, she wanted to believe him.

His hand was warm. His touch started to ease the tightness in her shoulders.

Though touched by his words, Celia wasn't certain she could completely believe him.

Nothing would suddenly get better.

She was old enough now to know life was never that easy. To accomplish anything took time and dedication. Hard work was necessary to get anything out of life.

Wasn't she working hard at this new life?

Celia thought back through the morning to all of the work she had put into preparing that meal. She was doing what she had been taught to do by her own mother: prepare everyone for the day ahead of them.

People needed to wake up, eat something filling, and be in good company. That was the hard work she had done.

Perhaps there was more that was involved, some other work that she needed to be able to do to act as a helpful wife and mother.

The hope that had begun to rise within her suddenly deflated. How was she supposed to know how to do any of this?

All of those years learning from her mother and spending time with her siblings' children should have been enough.

"I just don't know what to do," Celia mumbled. "I'm scared to make a mistake. To hurt someone."

"It's not like you're doing it on purpose. And the children have been through a lot; everything hurts. It's not you, Celia. I really think we just need time.

"Hey, I'll help you," he said suddenly. "Yes, that's what we can do. I'll help bring you and the children closer."

Wiping her arm across her face, Celia sniffled and looked up at him. He had beautiful eyes on a hopeful face. The man was handsome, kind, and trying so hard to help her.

She couldn't resist finding a little bit of hope to latch on to when she was with him.

"I suppose that might help. But how?" Celia asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We'll figure it out as we go."

"How long do you think that will take?"

She asked this question while he climbed onto his feet. Wiping his pants off and then his hands, Brent flashed a quick smile before offering her his hand so she could get up, as well.

"We'll start tonight," he promised.

Licking her lips, Celia couldn't resist reaching out to take his hand. It gripped her firmly before carefully tugging her onto her feet.

He did this so quickly that she nearly fell off balance and stumbled into him.

“We can do this,” Brent said. “Together.”

Pushing down the doubt, she hurriedly nodded. She wanted to believe him more than anything else.

And perhaps he was right. With a little bit more help, maybe she could be the mother to this family that she wanted to be so badly.



The rest of the day was slow for Brent; he was constantly distracted by everything and couldn't pay attention. He nearly chopped his thumb off, catching himself just in time.

His thoughts wandered back to his children. Even with all the pain, they brought him such joy. They always had.

*"You're going to be a wonderful father," Nicole assured him.*

*They were going to be parents soon. The idea was practically unimaginable. Pacing around the room, Brent rubbed his hands together in worry. It was growing late and he was tired; they both were.*

*But he had forgotten to feed the lambs. The action had sent him spiraling into a dark cloud of worries, making him wonder if all of this could potentially be a mistake.*

*If he forgot about the sheep, what else had he forgotten? Anything could happen then.*

*That meant he could do something terrible to his pregnant wife or his unborn child. He might forget about them or do something wrong.*

*He could hurt someone. What if he set the baby down and couldn't remember where the child had gone?*

*Shuddering, Brent started to pace more quickly than before.*

*"I don't want to mess this up. What if I... I don't know, what if I mess up?" He felt like a stammering mess.*

*Nicole stood up, grabbing his arm so he had to stop in his tracks.*

*He immediately grasped her in return, one hand on her shoulder and then one over her belly. Feeling the baby's movement comforted him.*

*When his wife spoke, she did so in a low whisper. It forced him to listen and pay close attention.*

*"Brent, you are a good man. You try your hardest in all that you do, don't you? On this ranch. With me. With your friends.*

*"That is what matters most: you always do your best to help those around you. That means you will do the same for this baby.*

*"You are a good husband, and you shall be a good father, as well. I'm certain of it."*

*She was hugging him by the time she finished speaking.*

*Sighing, Brent set his chin on the top of her head while he pondered her sweet words. He wanted to believe all that she had said.*

*It meant the world to him that he was finally going to have a family.*

*The longer they stayed close like that, the more he began to relax.*

*Maybe he could do this. It would be hard, but it would be worth it. They had wanted this all of their lives, he and Nicole. And now they would finally have it together.*

*Brent closed his eyes and said a prayer right then. He prayed to God that all might be well. They could have a big family with lots of love and wonderful times.*

With time, he was getting used to not expecting Nicole around every corner. Especially since Celia's impending arrival.

The emptiness in the bed next to him had started to grow normal, like it once had been when he was young.

Much of the past blurred all together. But the one thing that never faded was the memory of all the hope and dreams he'd had in the past.

Some of it had been desires all on his own, while others had been attached to his family in one way or another. He remembered the funny feeling in his stomach and the hope in his heart for all that might come his way.

He'd had a lot of it.

Ever since his wife's passing, he had struggled to find those feelings again. It had felt as though they had all gone away.

Brent moved another log over so that he could chop it in two. The repetitive motion was usually good to give him time to think.

All he had to do was remember not to injure himself in the process.

His thoughts turned to Celia and his morning conversation with

her. There had to be a way for her to help him.

Though he had been worried about their future, sitting beside her had quickly reassured her that he wanted to do whatever it took to help his wife.

They were a team now. If one of them was struggling, then the other needed to be ready to help in any way possible.

That was exactly what he planned to do. Hefting up his ax, Brent inhaled deeply and tried to think of what could be done to aid her.

Celia needed to feel better prepared about what to do and how to act around her new family. He remembered hearing the worry in her voice. She didn't deserve that.

There had to be something he could do to help her feel comfortable in her new home and with the children.

She was good with kids; he knew that much. Her letters to him had been filled with stories about how she used to spoil her nieces and nephews.

The games she had mentioned always sounded delightful. Hadn't she given his children, now theirs, several gifts? Celia cared deeply; she was doing so much to help.

It was his turn now.

Chopping wood and thinking, Brent tried to get as much done as possible. He moved quickly through his chores. They were never-ending, but he did his best.

Not wanting to leave her alone for too long, however, he forced

himself to step away from some of the workload for the evening.

“Hello,” Celia said when he made his way through the door.

His coat and hat were hung on the wall before he joined her in the kitchen. She was in the middle of making supper.

There was squash on the table with a few other vegetables. Everything was getting cut up and layered into a pan in slices.

“This looks delicious. What is it?”

The children were in the next room, laughing and shrieking over the wooden toys that he had carved for them a few years back. One of them seemed to have hidden the horse and the others were searching for it.

Celia glanced toward the hall as well before giving him a tentative smile.

“Truth be told, I don’t really know. I’ve only seen a few pictures of it before back home in Boston at the fancy restaurants that my family could never quite afford.

“My mother had it once at an event, I think. That’s how I know about it. I just thought... well, a dish I hardly know perhaps could not be found out here. It won’t upset the children, will it?”

His heart softened upon seeing the worry in her face. Already she was concerned about making the same mistake from that morning.

All he wanted to do was wrap her up in his arms to reassure her that it wouldn’t happen.

But he didn't.

Something held him back, though he didn't know what it was. While Brent craved the opportunity to feel close to her, he knew they needed time.

Besides, he wasn't sure he remembered how it was to be married—hugs and kisses felt so strange to him.

His hands tightened into fists as he tried to think about what else he could do to comfort her.

"No," Brent answered her question after a long pause. "No, it won't upset anyone. Except for Liam, I suppose. He doesn't like tomatoes."

Celia winced, wrinkling her nose. "Oh, dear. I wish I had known. Well, I shall try to add a section where there are no tomatoes. Are you done with your work for the night?"

"I am, yes. And now you can put me to work. How can I help?" he asked. Leaning forward, he grinned. "I've been told I'm pretty good in the kitchen."

"Oh?" she asked hopefully.

Brent shook his head, remembering that she still didn't know him very well.

"Sorry, that was supposed to be a joke. I'm not really that good. But I am a very good helper so long as you tell me what to do."

Her eyes widened before she gave him a nod. "Oh right, of course. Yes, I'll accept your help. Everything is sliced and ready to go.

“I just need to pile everything into the pot in order. I think that sounds good, don’t you?”

“Definitely,” he assured her.

While the children played, Brent worked in the kitchen alongside Celia. Any worries he might have had about being too close to his new wife began to fade away.

Their shoulders brushed against one another, and they touched hands when they traded vegetable slices. Every touch gave Brent hope for their future.

To his relief, Celia smiled at him every single time.

It didn’t take long before everything was cooked and ready. While she set the table, Brent called the children over to take their seats.

He said grace and then everyone settled down to eat.

Mary was still sullen, but she had ended up eating half of her plate without Brent having to tell her to. The others ate eagerly, starved from a day of fun.

The meal passed quickly without trouble, something he could tell his wife was relieved by when she started to clean up with a broad smile on her face.

The rest of the evening flew by. By the time everyone retired, Brent knew how to help her.

“Come sit,” he invited Celia once they were dressed in their nightclothes for bed. A lantern provided soft light as he watched her brush her long, beautiful hair before joining him there.

Celia asked him, “Yes?”

Straightening up and turning to her, he gave her a smile. “I know how to help. This morning was a terrible accident because there was no way for you to know about the dish.

“What I can do is teach you everything I know about the children so you will always have an idea of how to connect with them.”

“I think that sounds wonderful,” she was quick to respond. Nodding, Celia shifted in the bed to get comfortable. Her brush was still in one hand when she asked, “Tell me everything.”

It would be a long night.

A smile made its way onto his face. There was hardly anything a parent loved more than talking about their children. Eager to share his family with her, Brent dove in.

He talked about how different each of the children were. Switching from one to the next, he couldn’t seem to stop.

It was important that he tried to show them in their best light while also letting her know what to expect.

He had only just begun when Celia made him pause so she could pull out her journal to take notes.

“Liam hates tomatoes,” she said while she wrote. “I remember that one. It looked like everyone else enjoyed the dish.

“Is there any food that makes anyone sick? My father can’t eat mushrooms.”



He shook his head. “No, I think they’re pretty good. Liam and Lily used to be very picky about what they ate, but they’ve been getting older.

“I think they’ve been watching their older sisters to decide what to do. The twins are inseparable, you know. Liam is very gentle and a little soft. He’s very sweet.

“As for Lily? Well, she’s louder and she likes messes.”

That made Celia chuckle. “Yes, she asked me if we could dump the flour on the table earlier today. I had a feeling she might do that often.”

“All the time.” Brent grinned. “No one encourages that behavior, trust me. But we’re working on it. Penelope is always helpful in those matters.

“She’s grown up a lot recently. It worries me that she’s growing too fast, but she seems content. Doesn’t always say much—she would rather have her nose in a book.”

“I don’t blame her,” murmured his wife. Glancing up, she gave him a shrug. “Books are magical, that’s all. Does she like all books?”

He had to think about that. “Mostly, yes. Poetry and stories. My children, I mean the kids, are pretty simple to get to know. Mary’s just, well, Mary. She’s a spitfire.

“She used to want to be the sheriff in town and now she wants to be a cowgirl. Though she’s small, she’s strong and likes doing all sorts of work on the ranch.”

Pausing, Celia studied him curiously. “Really? All of the work?”

“Well, most of it. She’ll do anything that keeps her moving. And besides, she loves the ranch. Mary also loves riding horses and can even throw a lasso. Not a lot of ten-year-olds can do that.”

“It’s very impressive, indeed. Mary is a force to be reckoned with,” Celia added before letting out a loud sigh. “I just want her be happy.

“There must be something I can do that will convince her to talk to me. Perhaps I could learn to ride a horse?”

His eyes widened. “You can’t ride?”

“Few people ride in Boston,” she said defensively. “Everything is so close that you might as well walk. I didn’t think I would be riding horses someday.”

Shaking his head, Brent gave an exaggerated groan.

“Well, you’re lucky you came here. We’re the best riders in town. You’ll need to be able to do that here, and I think it would really impress Mary.”

“Really? I mean, I really want to. It’s easier with the others, of course. I can talk about books and read with Penelope. Then for Liam, all I have to do is play with him.

“When Mary was off in her room, Liam was a sweetheart. Lily is a bit tougher, though I like what you said about having her help me with the chickens,” Celia explained.

“I’m very excited, Brent. All of this will help me to connect with the children. Don’t you think?”

“I know it,” he assured her. He opened his mouth to convince her of his point, but then he watched as Celia gave one of the biggest yawns he had ever seen.

Brent added, “It will be perfect once we’ve had some good sleep for tonight.”

She offered him one of her dazzling smiles. “Thank you, Brent. Truly. Good night.”

Both of them made their way under the blankets. First, Brent blew out his lantern by the window and then curled up in bed. “Good night, Celia.”

**A**fter staying up talking so late with Brent, Celia was grateful when he told her the following morning that she should stay in bed a while longer.

“Are you certain?” she asked him. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

He raised an eyebrow at her while he tucked his shirt into his pants. “A bother? Celia, it’s Sunday. The kids are probably sleeping in, too.

“Besides, you’ve only just arrived, and a lot has happened; you deserve it.”

It was hard to argue with that.

Biting her lip, she nodded and curled up under the blankets. They were terribly cozy, only reminding her how sleepy she still felt.

Her eyes were already closing again by the time Brent walked out the door.

Part of her expected to sleep for a couple more hours. However, this wasn’t the case. Celia dozed for nearly thirty minutes before

suddenly jerking up and feeling wide awake.

She sat up and looked around.

Though she contemplated staying put a little longer, she was suddenly anxious to start her day. Nodding to herself, she climbed out of bed and dressed.

After pinning her hair back, she made her way out of the bedroom.

The doors to the children's rooms were open. She peeked in the nearest one where Penelope and Mary slept. While Mary was snoring softly in a ball under her blankets, Penelope was gone.

Liam and Lily were awake in their room. When she looked in, they waved before returning to jumping on their beds. She thought about telling them to stop but saw no trouble with it.

Leaving them there, she started into the kitchen.

There was something special about Sundays.

It was the Lord's day and a perfect day to spend with family. She remembered how her parents used to make games for them all to enjoy; they would play-act and read the scriptures together, take walks, and visit with friends.

As she had grown older, the fun had slowed down, but there was always that tender feeling within her heart.

She wondered about Brent and the children; did they see Sundays as a special day, as well?

If they didn't, Celia considered what she might do to make that

happen.

She hummed while she worked in the kitchen. They had fresh berries and so she decided to make biscuits to go with them. It would be a simple meal, and a delicious one at that.

The food didn't take her long, and she cleaned while the biscuits baked.

When they were done, she set everything out on the table. Then she paused to look out the window to study how much time had passed.

Did they eat together as a family on Sunday mornings? She hardly knew.

Thinking of Mary fast asleep in her bed, Celia decided not to bother everyone. If they were hungry, then they could help themselves.

She took a biscuit herself, brushed some honey on it, and decided to step outside.

"Penelope?" Celia hadn't expected to find the young girl there curled up in the biggest chair with a book.

The oldest of the children looked up and shared a hesitant smile. Her fingers fumbled with the book as though she couldn't decide if she wanted to keep it open or shut.

"Hello, Celia. Oh. Should I call you something else?"

Stepping out to join her, Celia shook her head. "Celia will do perfectly. I didn't think I would find you out here. Was your book

so good that you couldn't wait another moment to finish it?"

"How did you know?" Penelope asked her with flushed cheeks.

The seat beside the young girl was available. Celia pointed to it; when Penelope nodded, she took a seat. She wiggled in the seat for a moment to get comfortable before answering the question.

"Because I used to do the same thing. I love books. Stories and poetry and the like; it's all wonderful. Don't you think?" Celia smiled when she watched Penelope nod eagerly.

"I worked in a bookshop once. Not very long, but I loved being there."

"You told me." Penelope sighed, and Celia was happy to hear that the girl remembered their earlier conversation. "That sounds dreamy."

"But a little hard. Books have a lot of corners," Celia added pointedly. When Penelope cracked a grin, she smiled as well before changing the topic.

"What are you reading, then? I don't know what you like."

Penelope widened her gaze in alarm before changing her mind and beaming at Celia, instead. "Poetry is my favorite, but they didn't have any more poetry books."

"If you don't have poetry books, it doesn't mean you can't access poetry. It's about the rhymes and flow. We can write them ourselves."

"I used to do this in a game with my oldest sister, actually."

“Really?” Penelope asked. “You can do that?”

Celia nodded while she tried to think. “Yes, you can do that. Now, if you spot my hat, please let me know, I’ve got to go. See? That wasn’t good, but I tried.”

“That was very good! How do you do that?” Penelope asked hopefully.

With a little bit of guidance, Celia helped the game to take shape. The young girl set her book down and listened carefully.

The two of them slowly got into the flow of the activity, sometimes finishing each other’s poems. It was easy to start with the single syllable words, but Celia attempted to challenge herself, even when it didn’t end well.

But from another perspective, this was going perfectly.

Penelope was a very shy young girl who didn’t seem to know what to do with herself when it came to moving or talking or even breathing.

She often had a crease in her brow, showing that she was trying to make sense of things. Celia thought it was sweet.

“And then the cat went... goodbye!”

Ending their last poem there, she looked at Penelope with wide eyes to see if that worked. The young girl stared back at her as though she was trying to decide the same thing.

The two of them burst out laughing.



“That was so funny. I’ve never done this before. I never thought I would meet someone who likes poetry like I do,” Penelope added with a hopeful smile on her face.

“This was a lot of fun, Celia, thank you.”

It took Celia a minute to respond. She was so touched by the girl’s kindness. Penelope was a sweetheart, too kind for this world.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Celia nodded.

“That is very sweet of you to say, Penelope. Thank you for the fun. I would love to do this with you at any time, you know. Reading or poetry, whatever you like,” Celia added pointedly.

She squeezed Penelope’s hand. “There are biscuits in the kitchen if you’re hungry.”

“Oh, yes.” The young girl hopped out of her seat to follow her inside.

Celia had found a kindred spirit in Penelope. For that, she was grateful.

Even if Penelope changed when Mary came out to pout about everything, Celia was glad to have any cheerful interaction in the house.

Once breakfast was cleaned up, she decided to go outside to check on Brent, who was out with the cows and calves. The two of them talked about their mornings.

“We would typically go to church,” Bent explained at last. “I just haven’t had the time.”

“I understand,” Celia said with a nod. “Please, don’t stress yourself out. Is there anything I can do to help? I can learn how to milk cows and...”

Brent grinned. “Thank you, but that’s all right. For now, at least.”

They talked for a little while longer. Celia had expected more awkwardness to settle between them in the beginning of their marriage, but it never arrived.

She enjoyed being around Bent. Not only was he handsome, but her husband was also sweet and charming and smart.

When she realized she was slowing him down, she left, returning to the house to start on preparing lunch.

Penelope and Mary were outside by the pond, she noticed, while the twins were still inside. She decided this would be a good time to try and engage with them.

“Lily? Liam? I could use your help in the kitchen to make pork pies. Do the two of you want to help me?” she asked hopefully in the front room, where the youngest children had piled together all the books in the house for some game.

Scrunching her nose, Lily shook her head. “We’re playing a game.”

Liam nodded. “Yeah, a game.”

“That is a fair point. I don’t want to take you away from having fun. But I think we could have some other fun in the kitchen, don’t you think?” Celia suggested.

“It’s a lot of work and I would love your help. And with you two

there, the three of us could have fun. There will be a lot of flour to play with.”

Lily’s eyes widened. “We can play in the flour?”

The twins were sold on this idea. Celia led the way to the kitchen, where she let Lily draw in the flour and gave her a few measuring spoons to play with.

Liam played at first also but then grew curious and started to follow Celia around.

“I’m going to mix the eggs in now. That will help the dough to bake,” Celia explained.

She walked him through every step and gave him small tasks to do. He grew a little more cheerful and confident every time.

Soon, their meal was baking, and she’d found a way for the twins to play while they cleaned up.

Celia paused by the kitchen window to look outside. Penelope was walking back toward the house now. As for Mary, the younger girl had a lasso in hand that she was working with.

Watching for several minutes, Celia pondered how she would talk to the young girl.

She wanted to do it right.

Thinking about her conversation with Brent the night before, she knew she had to try something with Mary.

This was it. Besides, it would be perfect for a distraction. Brent

clearly had a lot of work to do. He had mentioned some sickly calves and the terrible drought over the last couple of months.

She would leave him to his work while she connected with the children.

It wouldn't be easy befriending all the kids, Celia knew, but she wanted this more than anything.

When Celia woke up, she did so with a smile.

Sitting up to stretch, she inhaled deeply. From the corner of her vision, she could see her notebook. Her wrist still ached from taking so many notes.

She picked it up and set it on the edge of her bed before moving around to change.

Celia dressed in a flower-printed dress, fixing the wrinkles before she started braiding her hair around her head like a crown. She had just finished putting in the last pin when she heard a voice.

“Good morning.”

Jumping, she looked up from her nightstand to see Brent sitting up in bed.

His curly hair was all over the place, with one strand sticking straight out beside his ear. He wore a sleepy smile while he peered at her.

And there was a slight red mark on one cheek, since that was the

side he had been sleeping on.

She fumbled with her hands, trying to ignore the urge to run her hands through his beautiful and crazy hair. She smiled instead.

“Good morning, Brent. I’m sorry if I woke you.”

Shaking his head, he ruffled his hair only to make it worse.

He yawned and then said, “Please don’t worry about it. I have a lot of work that needs to get done today so I should be getting up now. I’m just glad I didn’t sleep too late.”

Celia chuckled. “We did stay up far into the night, I’m afraid. I shouldn’t have kept asking those questions. I’m—”

“Don’t be.” Brent cut her off before she could apologize.

When she looked into his eyes, Celia swore she could see a sparkle. They were a dark, rich green that only appeared brighter with sunlight in his face. She had never seen such beautiful eyes.

Swallowing, she forced herself to look away. She nodded and then hurriedly checked her hair to make sure it would stay out of her face for the day.

“It’s very nice. Your hair, I mean,” Brent complimented her quietly.

“Thank you.” Celia turned back to him with a smile. Her gaze lingered on him once again before she let out a soft sigh. “Well, I should probably get into the kitchen and let you get dressed.”

He nodded without saying a word. The two of them gazed at one another for one more moment. Only then did she realize that she

needed to follow through with what she had just said.

Her legs felt heavy, but she forced herself to start moving. There would be more time to talk and sit with her husband another time.

Walking out of the room, she pondered over how nice it felt to once again be wed.

It hadn't felt right being on her own like she had been when Richard left her. Beds became too cold and empty and lonely.

Everything in life seemed quieter, but her breathing was always too loud.

Celia hadn't realized how much these changes had affected her until now.

She made her way out of the bedroom before starting down the hall and into the kitchen.

It was another beautiful morning with the sun beginning to rise. The dawn brought fresh air and splendid colors in the sky.

Opening the curtains, Celia paused to admire the view.

This may have been her second day in her new home, but she already had a feeling that she was never going to tire of seeing this world around her. It was so different from Boston.

Though she thought she had always enjoyed her home, now she wondered how she could have never guessed what beauty she was missing.

But it could be improved now that she was here.

Inhaling deeply, she gathered her courage and turned to face the kitchen. The worry about yesterday lingered in the back of her mind.

It wasn't alone now; there was hope and courage as well to keep her on her feet.

"I can do this," Celia reassured herself in the empty room. "I'm certain of it. Let's try this once more. Maybe if I prepare something else..."

Spinning around, she hastened to the corner storage cupboard where containers of flour and sugar were kept. It only took her a second to find what she needed because she had put the jar in herself upon her arrival.

Besides the toys for the children, she had brought along her favorite molasses.

Celia prepared the molasses cake from memory. She had worked hard to be able to do this when she was younger and moved quickly to cook everything in a timely manner.

It would be sweet and moist; this was a favorite treat of hers back from when she was a child. She'd loved licking her fingers clean and having the house smell so delightful.

Hopefully, the children would enjoy this, as well.

Once she brought it out to cool, Celia washed her hands and went to wake the children. They teetered out and gathered around the table with hesitant looks on their faces.

Most likely, they were worried about seeing that dish again for



breakfast.

Tension set in.

“Come gather around,” she said hopefully. “Take your seats, won’t you? Oh, it smells delicious. I wanted to make you all something from my home.

“Well, my childhood home back in Boston. Have you heard of it? We’re very fond of molasses.”

Lily tilted her head up. “Moses?”

Her confusion made the other children giggle.

Eagerly taking their seats, the four kids sniffed the air. Celia tugged off the cover she had set on the cake.

“Here we are. Molasses. It’s like a thick, sugary syrup. I thought we could all use something delicious. Don’t you? Let’s eat.”

Her heart pounded in her chest as she waited anxiously for the children to act. She was the last to sit down, worried that they might run away from her.

But they didn’t.

She served everyone a fair helping before taking a bite. The children watched her curiously before exchanging looks and taking a forkful for themselves.

Her heart warmed when she saw their eyes widen in delight.

“Wait!” Mary cried out sharply. The cheerful mood came to a halt

as everyone turned to look at her. She frowned with a low brow. "Where's Papa?"

Several of them eyed the empty seat at the table before looking at Celia. Having such attention focused on her made her heart skip an anxious beat.

Though she knew that this question would come, she still didn't feel very prepared for it. Wiggling in her seat, she tried to find the right words.

This was something she had talked to Brent about the night before: they wanted to see if the children might behave better if he wasn't around.

Celia had thought it would be a good idea but now she wasn't sure.

"He didn't get his work done yesterday, so there's a lot more for him to do today," she explained in what she hoped was a calm voice. "Your father is working in the barn and didn't have time to join us."

"But he's going to get hungry," Mary said in an aggressive tone. "Why don't you want him to have any cake?"

Eyes widening, Celia wondered how the girl had made such a leap.

She noticed that Penelope hesitated and then bit her lip before looking down. As for the twins, well, they had clumps of food in their hands and also looked near tears.

She thought quickly.

"Of course, I want him to have cake. There's enough for everyone

here, don't you think? Your father will have a slice when he takes a break."

Shy Penelope spoke up. "What about school?"

"I'll take you, don't worry," Celia said hurriedly. Then she thought of something. "When we finish eating, I think we might have a few minutes to run down to the stables to see your father."

"We can even bring him a slice of cake. How does that sound? I'm sure he would appreciate that."

The twins cheered. They loved the stables. Penelope nodded along.

But Celia was watching out for Mary, their little wild card. The young girl had put a clumsy braid in her hair and seemed to be pouting now. Her outburst had done her little good.

"Fine," she muttered. Then she took a bite and Celia saw her visibly begin to relax. Before the young girl was halfway through the meal, she was smiling and talking to Lily from across the table.

They ate together for a few more minutes. Celia felt her heart soaring. She could hardly believe this was working.

Still praying, she helped the children take care of their morning chores and then clean up.

"Papa's cake! We can't forget," Lily insisted as she grabbed the piece.

"Careful with it, dear," Celia said. "All right, come along. Let's go see Papa."

She opened the door and the four children flooded out. All of them ran but Lily, who was having a hard time carrying the small plate and fork for their father.

Coming over to her, Celia took that up so the girl could catch up with the others. She soon joined everyone in the barn where Brent was moving hay.

When she stepped inside, he was quick to turn to her. Penelope was talking about the molasses cake with Mary interjecting every couple of seconds.

He nodded along and gave Celia a smile. "It's working," he mouthed.

She beamed, nodding.

They lingered together as a family for a few minutes before it was time to go. Celia let the children lead the way off the ranch to make their way closer to town.

It was nice to explore the area some more and enjoy the sunlight. But she couldn't forget about her mission.

"Mary?" Celia asked tentatively, moving closer to the young girl. Mary glanced toward her and then looked away. But she was certainly listening.

"Mary, I heard that you are an excellent horse rider."

Mary's step faltered. "Yes, I'm very good," she said stiffly.

Inhaling deeply, Celia cleared her throat. "Well, I thought perhaps after school, we could go for a ride. You can show me around the

ranch. What do you think about that?"

The young girl squealed. "Really? I want to go riding! I haven't been riding in days. I can show you the far side of the river and...."

The excitement died suddenly as she cleared her throat and looked away again.

"I mean, I don't know. Maybe. I don't care."

It was hard not to smile.

"Well, you can think about it in school today. But I would love it if you would show me around the beautiful ranch.

"You could even show me how you lasso so well. Do you think you could teach me?"

Fumbling with her messy braid, Mary shrugged. She darted another look up at Celia. "I mean... I guess I can do that."

"That would be wonderful," Celia said warmly with a big grin.

She couldn't help herself. This felt like a big moment for the two of them.

Then, seeing Mary wrinkle her nose, Celia cleared her throat and realized she should have acted calmer. She opened her mouth to apologize, but it was too late.

Lily shouted to the schoolteacher up ahead. They had reached the schoolhouse before Celia had realized it. Mary gasped and immediately ran after her siblings, without giving her a goodbye.

Celia watched the young girl hurry away with the other children. She worried what might happen when school ended but found herself hoping for the best.

“**A**ll right, I’m ready.”

Brent smiled as Celia took a deep breath. She was trying to be brave, but she looked extremely anxious.

Not knowing what to do with her hands, she tugged at her dress and played with her hair and then clasped her hands together. That didn’t last very long.

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “You’re safe. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Her smile didn’t soften much, though she gave him a nod. He supposed that would have to be good enough for now.

Trying not to be too amused about this, he cleared his throat and then led her into the barn.

She had helped him finish with the hay, which had been very kind. The task wasn’t that difficult; a lot of the work on a ranch wasn’t. However, it was tedious and time-consuming.

Having Celia there for even just a few minutes greatly eased the weight on his shoulders.

While he liked to believe there had been one point in time when he had felt like the ranch was running smoothly, Brent wasn't exactly certain when that might have happened.

Even before Nicole passed away, it had felt like there was always work to do. He used to go to bed stressing about all that he hadn't been able to do until he finally began to realize all that extra stress wasn't doing him any good.

It didn't go away completely, but he had gotten used to it.

Brent scratched his head as he led the way over to Goldie, the older mare his first wife had always ridden. The horse was nearly ten years old and sweet as pie.

She had a good nature and had never hurt anyone.

"Are you sure about this?" Celia asked while peeping over his shoulder into the stall.

Nodding, he gave her a quick wink before opening the door.

He had known she would return from dropping off the children soon, so he had gone ahead to prepare the horse for her when she returned.

"What if she bites me?" Celia whispered.

"She can hear you if you whisper. And she won't bite you," he added hurriedly. "I promise. She's never bitten anyone before. Goldie isn't mean.

"Here, come take her lead rope. You need to get used to being around her, and she needs the same."



Offering her the rope, Brent flashed her a friendly smile. He knew horses could be intimidating. But he also believed in Celia, confident she could do this.

His wife managed a jerky nod. “Right. Yes. I can... I’ll grab that, okay.”

Their hands brushed against one another’s when he handed over the rope. His heart skipped a beat at the touch of her smooth, warm skin.

The two of them started slowly out of the barn. He found it hard to take his eyes off her. Staying close, he wanted to make sure she felt safe on their way to the nearby pen.

Every time Brent looked at Celia, he felt butterflies in his stomach. He hadn’t felt that sensation in a long time; it left him completely amazed.

It just made him want to be around her even more.

He especially liked the braided crown around her head. It was beautiful and neat, just like the rest of Celia.

By the time they reached the pen, his thoughts were anywhere but horses. It took him a minute to remember why they were out there.

Celia had stopped and was looking his way, waiting for him to open the pen.

“Oh, right. Sorry about that,” he said with a chuckle.

Brent opened the gate for them, closing it once the three of them were inside. He made his way over to his wife’s side to start with

the riding lesson.

It impressed him that Celia was nervous and yet determined to do this. Something told him she wouldn't mind sticking to wagons instead of ever actually riding.

Yet she didn't appear ready to quit. Her chin was stubbornly set.

She wasn't learning to ride for herself, after all. This was mainly so that she could spend time with Mary.

He couldn't be gladder about all she was doing to help him and his family. He had missed having that special person in the house to help keep everyone together.

"All right. Now you know about the horse and the equipment. It's time to get on," Brent told her. "Don't worry, we'll take this one step at a time."

"I'm not worried," Celia said. But that had to be a lie. He noticed when she said it that her nose twitched. "Well, let's do this, shall we?"

Brent moved closer to her so that he could help her out. He reminded her about the stirrups and guided her about where to put her hands.

Celia nodded along. She looked more determined every second to accomplish this.

"Here. I'm right beside you," Brent said as he placed his hands around her hips. Celia was halfway in the air and struggling.

The day was very warm; he used that as an excuse about why his

cheeks suddenly heated up.

For a moment, they were very close.

“Thank you,” he heard her mumble before hefting herself over the saddle.

Stepping back, Brent ran his gaze over his wife to make sure that everything was well. She was in the saddle with a flat back and low shoulders.

He was immediately impressed. Celia looked as though she had been riding all of her life. Glancing down, she gently fiddled with the reins before letting out another sigh.

Then she turned to him with a grim smile. “Well? I don’t look ridiculous, do I?”

“Not at all,” Brent said quickly. He shook his head and then stepped up close with one hand on Goldie’s nose. “I mean it. You’re making progress already.

“Now, hold on to those reins so you can get used to them. I’ll walk you two around in a few circles so you can get used to the motions. If you get anxious, just hold onto the horn right there.”

Nodding along, Celia obeyed.

Brent moved very carefully; he could hardly imagine what it was like to not know how to ride a horse. He had been riding for as long as he could remember. All of his children could ride, too.

Leading the way around the pen, Brent glanced back at Celia occasionally. He had always been a patient man and he was willing

to wait until she felt comfortable.

The stiffness in her shoulders slowly relaxed. She even smiled. Clearly enjoying herself, Celia concentrated and paid close attention to all that he did.

She was a fast learner. Soon, he was no longer needed. Stopping in his tracks, Brent came over to Celia's side.

"I think I'm done here. This belongs to you," he added while offering up the rope.

He stood next to her, his elbow practically on her knee. Though he hadn't meant to stand that close, he wasn't sure if he should step away.

Had she noticed? But how could she not? He wavered, uncertain of what to do.

Leaning down, Celia grasped the rope. Two of her fingers brushed over his; there was no way it could have been an accident.

The sensation sent a tingle through his hand. It climbed all the way up his arm and through the rest of his body.

He looked up and caught her gaze. Her lips curved up into a smile. She knew what she had just done.

Though they were there teaching her ride, this felt like their most intimate moment yet. They were so connected.

"Thank you," she murmured at last.

Swallowing hard, Brent nodded. He finally stepped back so that

Celia could practice riding on her own.

She was a fast learner and Goldie was a good horse. It brought him joy to see his wife doing so well.

“You’re doing great,” he promised her. “How does it feel?”

A short giggle escaped Celia’s lips. She slowed to answer him. “Wonderful. And who knows? I might be able to keep up with a ten-year-old now. What do you think?”

Laughing, he shook his head and walked over to where she had come to a stop. Celia was smart and sweet and funny.

He touched Goldie’s nose before tilting his head to admire the woman he had married.

“Let’s go for a ride.”

“I am riding,” she said pointedly. There was a small smile playing on her lips.

Brent chuckled. Warmth flooded through him. “You know what I mean. Stay here, won’t you? I’ll be right back.”

Celia nodded, straightening up again. “All right. I’ll be right here.”

Hurrying off to get his horse, Brent moved quickly. An idea had come to mind while watching Celia.

She was doing well and he wanted to show her a special spot. He just knew she would love it.

Soon, he was on his horse and opening the gate for her.

“Are you sure?” Celia asked, her confidence faltering for just a second.

He nodded, waving her over. “It’ll be fun, I promise. Just this way.”

The two of them started down the lane and further into the trees. They moved toward the mountains and through a small canyon.

It was a little place he had found when he’d first moved here. But he hadn’t been there since before Nicole’s passing. It had always been too painful.

For some reason, it felt good to do this now with Celia beside him.

The canyon opened up into a small valley. Red rock and grass were everywhere. The contrast they made with the blue sky was everything.

When they drew close, he turned to watch her face. Celia’s eyes were open wide as she looked around in amazement. There was something incredibly genuine about her.

He could see the life within her, the hope and the joy. As they reached the end of the canyon, he saw her look in amazement. It looked like she was even tearing up.

“This is incredible,” she murmured. “I can hardly believe this is real.”

They reached the waterfall. This was the spot he had wanted to show her.

The waterfall was wide and thin, falling with a rather musical

sound. This was the start of the stream that went through their land.

“Come on, let’s get in,” he invited her.

“Really?”

Nodding, he hopped down from his horse and then helped her do the same. The two horses were tied near grass and water.

Brent and Celia took off their shoes. Holding hands, they waded into the water.

The mist surrounded them, and he felt her tighten her grip on him. When he looked over, her hair was beginning to frizz and curl.

Stopping in his tracks, he pulled her close.

She was giggling with her eyes wide. “This is amazing! Oh, Brent... I always dreamed about seeing a waterfall. Doesn’t that sound silly? But I never saw one before.

“I just always wanted to see one, to touch one if I could. This is... perfect.”

“You’re perfect.”

Brent inhaled deeply over his silly remark. He didn’t mean to say that. He meant it, but it sounded ridiculous. “I’m sorry,” he quickly amended. “I didn’t mean to.

“I just... I’m really glad I could do this for you. I’m glad you’re here, Celia. Having you here is, well, perfect.”

She nodded along as he rambled through his explanation. Her smile kept growing until she was giggling again. Then, she stepped over to close the gap between them.

His heart pounded when Celia pressed herself against him.

It was only right that they embraced, sharing their first kiss.

Brent marveled over this incredible moment. He pulled her closer, moving a hand over her hair. Everything about Celia was soft and sweet.

Right then, he knew they were meant to be together. This marriage was meant to work; it had to.

Moving forward, he would do whatever it took to keep Celia in the family. He would smooth things over with Mary and fix up the ranch.

He promised himself silently that this would happen. There was no way he was going to lose Celia now.



Celia couldn't wipe the smile off her face if she tried.

"Thank you," she murmured softly when Brent once again wrapped his arms around her to help her back into the saddle.

Though she was fairly certain that she could do this on her own, there was something tender about the way he touched her. It had been a long time since anyone had done that, long enough that she had slowly begun forgetting what it felt like.

But not anymore.

Spending the afternoon in the middle of this hidden oasis felt like a wonderful dream from which she never wanted to wake. The sunshine and wind had been perfect, along with the cool temperature of the water and Brent's smile.

Her heart skipped a beat just thinking about him. Once situated in her saddle, she bit her lip and watched as her husband mounted his horse, as well.

He did so in a smooth manner, like he did everything else. The man was confident and kind. And out of all the things he could do,

he had married her.

It made her wonder in that moment why it had taken them so long to meet. Already she found herself feeling more connected to Brent than she had ever felt with Richard.

This hardly made any sense to her, yet Celia knew better than to deny the feelings of her heart.

Her former husband had had his sweet moments. He would spoil her and compliment her and dance with her.

But for some reason, in the back of her mind, she was always waiting for the moment to end, as though she knew it had to.

With Brent, it was different. Celia felt as though every moment could be this wonderful. She could sense the wonder all around them.

And her lips still tingled from being pressed against his. He looked over at her and she smiled with a blush creeping up her cheeks. Already she wished he would kiss her again.

The fine layer of scruff on his face had tickled her chin, and their kiss had only broken when she'd let out a giggle, no longer able to hold it in.

"Let's take a different path home," Brent recommended. "It's this way."

Nodding eagerly, Celia fell in line with him. "Is there anything special about this path?" She had a hard time imagining that anything could be better than the waterfall she had just enjoyed.

He glanced at her with a knowing grin, as though he was thinking the same thing. “It’s just a nice path. I was focused on getting you here, but now we can take our return more slowly.”

“Oh?” She nudged her horse closer to his. “It sounds as though you had a master plan to get me to that waterfall. One might find your intentions suspicious.”

It had been a long time since she had flirted, and now Celia couldn’t help but wonder if she was even doing it right. The blush wouldn’t leave her cheeks and now she feared that it never would.

She bit her lip to try and hold the smile from being so wide that her jaw ached. But everything seemed futile when she saw that sparkle in his eyes.

Chuckling, Brent nodded. “Perhaps, but I certainly didn’t see you complaining about it.”

She giggled and shook her head. They trailed slowly along the path and talked quietly, teasing on occasion, as they made their way back home.

The pathway to get to the waterfall had been spectacular through the canyon. However, it wasn’t hard to see just why Brent had recommended this other route home to go home.

The natural landscape only grew more beautiful along the way.

In a matter of minutes, the canyon gave way to a beautiful meadow filled with flowers. The stream wound its way through the vibrant colors, trickling in a sweet little melody.

Shades of green and yellow and pink and blue were everywhere.

At first, Celia had a hard time tracking the conversation because of the view before them. She didn't want to blink for fear of missing something.

The ride was utterly spectacular.

Shaking her head, she could hardly believe this was real. Celia thought about it and couldn't name a single picture that was prettier than this very moment.

"This is what heaven must be like," she said when there was a lull in the conversation.

Turning to Brent, she beamed. "I've never seen anything more exquisite. I never knew a place so perfect could exist. I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life here."

Emotion flickered behind his gaze for a moment. Brent glanced at her and then he looked over her shoulder to see the scenery all around them. Nodding, he let out a deep breath.

"Yes. It is, isn't it? I'm sorry. I haven't been here since... since Nicole." He said her name uncertainly. "I'm sorry. I don't know if I should..."

Knowing what was on his mind, she shook her head. "I don't mind, truly. We have both lost people, one way or another.

"And I know what you mean, it's hard to... to do some of the wonderful things when that certain someone isn't around anymore.

"I really am sorry for your loss. I can tell how wonderful Nicole was by being around you and your family."

Brent offered a grateful smile. "You're too kind. Every day is still a struggle... But I don't want to dwell on that now."

"I didn't mean to bring up such a sober subject in this meadow. Let us talk not of the past, but maybe the future."

It was her turn to raise an eyebrow. "Oh? What are your plans?"

Scratching his chin, he shrugged while he considered this. "I'm not sure. A happy future, I think, is what I'm looking for."

"The ranch needs a lot of work, but I want to be able to turn it into something great. For the children, you know? A good ranch and a sturdy home. I suppose I can't ask for too much more."

Celia nodded. "I think it sounds like a great future, Brent."

He dropped his hand back down to his side. "And you? What, uh, does a good future sound like to you?"

The question made her heart skip a beat. She thought she had known the answer to this all her life. All she had ever wanted was to be a mother and have a family.

It had never mattered where she did this or how many children she had. The family was the most important thing to her.

And now she was married and in a family with children. It had happened so quickly that she wasn't sure there had been time to consider such a question.

They rode for a few minutes before she could find something to say. Biting her lip, Celia didn't want to get this innocent question wrong.

“I want to be here,” she said at last. The smile made its way back onto her face. “Sometimes it’s hard to know what you want until it’s right there before you. This?”

“I want this meadow of flowers. I want to take walks through it with the children. I want to help care for the animals and prepare delicious food to feed my family.

“I want everything that I couldn’t have until now.”

When she chanced a look over at him, Brent’s gaze had softened. He seemed touched, nodding slowly over her words.

She waited for him to speak up and tell her she was wrong about something.

But he didn’t.

“That sounds perfect,” he said with a sheepish smile. “It sounds much better than my future.”

She tutted, drawing her horse close to his. “What are you talking about? You’re in my future, Brent. You may have the best of it all, I’d say.”

Her playful words made him chuckle. Nodding, he fixed his hands on the reins before he said anything more.

“I’m glad of it. I think all of that sounds wonderful. You have such a big heart, Celia. I think having a good life like that is all we can really strive for.

“And I’ll be honest, I’m glad not to be alone in this anymore. I want a good life for my children. It’s been my priority since

Penelope was born.

“But I was starting to worry that I wouldn’t be able to do this, at least not alone.”

Celia shook her head. “You don’t have to concern yourself with such thoughts anymore, Brent. I’m here. We’re married, aren’t we?”

“It’s up to us to work together. For ourselves, for the children, for the future...”

Feeling a lump form in her throat, she fell quiet.

Such words made her think about Richard and how they had promised to build a life together. But he had walked away from her.

She had done all that she could. But the moment one thing wasn’t right for him, he was out the door.

“Celia? Are you all right?” Brent reached out to touch her arm.

Sniffling, she forced herself to come together. She had been lost in her thoughts long enough and didn’t want to dwell on the past.

“Yes, I’m fine, I’m...” She trailed off when she looked over her shoulder at his furrowed brow.

It was right then that she realized she had to tell him.

It wouldn’t do to keep the details of the past hidden. Celia had been so nervous about talking to Brent about a life together that she had never been completely truthful with him.

“It’s just that, well, this is everything I wanted. A good husband and a house filled with children,” Celia explained slowly. “I thought we would have that when I married Richard.

“But I couldn’t have children. We tried, but I kept losing them. It hurt so badly when I came to the conclusion that I would never be able to carry a child.

“And it hurt Richard—more than I expected.”

“Oh?”

The lump in her throat wouldn’t go away. Nodding, Celia added, “He wanted to keep trying, but I couldn’t. It hurt too much. I would be given a glimpse of hope only for it to be taken away.

“He didn’t understand. He couldn’t. So, the morning after my last miscarriage, he left. There were divorce papers in his place... I haven’t seen him since.”

Such words felt heavy on her tongue when they came off, and then rested on her shoulders. Celia sniffed and wiped away a small tear. She darted a look at Brent, not sure of what to expect.

Her husband had slowed his horse down even more. His lips hung slightly open as he looked at her with a hurt gaze.

He appeared almost as devastated as she had felt many times over the last couple of years.

“That’s...” He couldn’t find the words. “Oh, Celia, I’m so sorry. I don’t even know what to say. I have never known any man to do that.



“You didn’t deserve any of that, no one does. I can’t believe anyone would be so cruel to his wife. I would never do any such thing. I’m so sorry.”

She nodded with a tight smile. His gentle words touched her heart, and she felt hardly able to believe that he was responding in such a kind and polite manner.

Listening to her hammering heart, Celia slowly realized what this meant. Now, Brent knew she wouldn’t be able to give him any more children if he had wanted them.

She knew of men who would think her as less of a woman about this, as though she had any choice in the matter.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” she murmured. “I was afraid you wouldn’t want me anymore. That you wouldn’t think I’m a real woman.”

Her husband looked at her in confusion for a minute before it dawned on him. His eyes widened and he shook his head.

“That would never happen, Celia. I’m sorry you felt you needed to hide this. You shouldn’t have to carry this burden alone. All I have to do is look at you to know you’re a real woman.

“Besides, our family is big enough. At least for right now. If you ever want more children, well, there are always those without parents whom we can welcome into our home,” he rambled.

“I wouldn’t say no to that. The children are always asking for another sibling. But it’s not necessary and only if you want that. But I don’t care, not really.”

Listening to him brought the tears back into Celia's eyes. She managed a watery smile, nodding. She reached out and took his hand, giving him a squeeze.

"Thank you," she whispered.

It had been a long time since someone had been so kind to her. She blinked back her tears and managed to take a deep breath. The weight of the past faded away with Brent there beside her.

She looked up to find the house just ahead of them. They had covered more ground than she had anticipated, already passing the barn. She supposed they should stop their horses.

But then, something caught her eye.

Dropping his hand, Celia hesitated when she saw a lone figure standing in the doorway of their porch.

**T**hough they let go of one another's hands, Brent was already hopeful for another opportunity to do that again.

But their serious conversation had to come to a halt. She had seen the figure, as well. Glancing at her, he was a little relieved to find that she appeared as confused as he did.

It wasn't like they were expecting guests.

Brent ransacked his mind for who it could be. His heart pounded, though he couldn't quite tell why. What did he have to fear?

Celia was beside him and the children were at school. There was no reason for any trouble.

A neighbor, perhaps, or the pastor. He came to visit on occasion, like he did most of the folks in town.

Once they were close enough to the house, he didn't want the horses any further into the plants or the garden. When Celia glanced at him, he nodded.

The two of them slid down off of the horses. She took a single step

toward the house but waited while he temporarily tethered their animals to the nearby tree.

“Who...?” she murmured when he joined her side.

Not certain how to answer, Brent took her hand in his and guided her to the house.

There was a knot growing inside his stomach. He couldn’t explain to her or to anyone else why he felt so bothered.

Nicole came to mind for a second. That was one of the last times, he supposed, that someone had come to his door unannounced like this.

A few folks had stopped by after the accident. Most often, one of the children would be there to accept whatever small gift or meal was provided and then close the door.

The dread lingered in his heart while he tried to push that painful memory out of his mind. His morning with Celia had been perfect.

Why did he have to go and ruin it with his worried mind and aching heart? They were finding a way to be happy.

“Mr. Calloway? Mr. Calloway!”

Hearing his name called, Brent stopped in his tracks. Celia did the same. She inhaled sharply when the shadowy figure on the porch finally came out into the sunlight.

It was their neighbor, Annie Mae.

Shock entered his system as he watched the woman wave an arm

in the air at him. She hastily made her way down the steps. Her chest heaved and she didn't seem to know what she was doing.

The woman was frantic.

But why?

Brent started walking, tugging Celia alongside him so that they could meet Annie Mae in the middle of the yard.

The older woman's hair was falling out of her braid and her face was red from exertion. Once they reached each other, she couldn't stop fanning herself.

"Oh, I've been looking all over for you," Annie Mae wheezed.

When she paused to cough, Celia stepped forward. She patted the woman's shoulder and glanced at Brent in concern before asking, "Are you all right?"

"What is it, Annie Mae? Let's get you inside. I can fetch you some water and you can rest."

But the woman only waved her off.

"There's no time. I needed to come here straight away. I was in town, shopping in town, and—and I saw what happened. They took Liam. Liam's at the doctor's."

Cold, white fear struck Brent. "What?" he cried out as he thought about his sweet young boy. The thought of Liam in pain or hurt fractured his heart. "What happened?"

The woman's hands fluttered about her, making him think of the

wings of a bird that didn't know where to go.

He tried to concentrate on her face instead of the hands that wouldn't stop moving. They only served to make him more anxious.

"I don't know. His teacher wasn't sure, I mean... He's sick. He's sick from something, terribly sick. I don't know what it was; it had to have been from something that he ate? I don't know.

"The teacher couldn't help him so they took him straight to the doctor's. I came here as fast as I could to tell you," spluttered Annie Mae.

Brent nodded along, hanging onto every word.

Nothing she said made him feel any better, though. His chest heaved at the thought of any of his children ill, let alone his youngest. He tried to swallow but his throat seemed swollen shut.

Terror ran through his veins, turning him cold. Brent started to ball his hands into fists before realizing that he still held one of Celia's hands.

She twitched slightly so he was able to catch himself just in time before hurting her.

But that didn't change the fact that something was wrong with Liam.

"We have to go," Brent told Celia.

She nodded, nudging him backward. "Thank you, Annie Mae! We're on our way."

Together, they raced back to their horses and mounted up. Brent led the way down the street toward town.

Home and his work on the ranch were immediately forgotten. None of it mattered when he was thinking about his family.

His thoughts turned to the past as he rode along. Leaning forward, he told himself that this wasn't happening again.

It couldn't be. His heart hammered as he wondered if he would be able to handle dealing with this if it got any worse.

Certainly, the other children couldn't. They had been through so much so quickly.

Forever impressed on his soul was when the doctor had made his way to the house.

Brent had been cutting apples for the children to eat. Everyone was playing with their chalkboards at the table. The day was sunny and the three kids were in a good mood.

He'd thought that everything was going well.

His wife and Mary had ventured off to town for a short trip so they could make supper. Though he had told her they didn't really need potatoes for their roast beef, Nicole had been insistent.

So, Penelope had stayed back to watch the twins so he could work on the ranch.

There was work that needed to be done on the fences and he needed to patch a hole in the barn, but he decided it could wait until another time. That could be done tomorrow.

It was just nice being able to spend time with his family since things had been so busy lately.

He'd thought at the time that they would have a nice evening as a family. There was no way for him to have known what to expect.

The knock on the door should have been the first sign.

"Who's that, Papa?" Penelope had asked him.

He remembered shrugging and shaking his head before making his way to the door. Once he opened it, he found the doctor.

Henry Pulcer had worn a sober, even nervous, expression that was the first sign of trouble.

The events that followed as Doctor Pulcer explained what had happened had torn down Brent's strength. He had felt stripped bare when he realized that his wife was laid in her eternal rest in the back of the doctor's cart.

And then, there was Mary, sitting on the bench.

All the pain he had been feeling had to be swallowed down to the pit of his stomach so that he could retrieve his daughter.

Mary had been in shock with tear stains on her cheeks. She could hardly speak, let alone move.

With her in his arms, he had needed to explain to the other children that something had happened to their mother.

That was still the hardest thing that Brent had ever needed to endure. There had been no one to comfort him while he'd tried to



keep his family from falling apart.

A sinking feeling of loneliness had grown in his stomach, never stopping.

And now, on his way into town, it grew bigger.

“Over there,” Brent said as he gestured toward the left lane as they reached town.

He glanced at Celia and blinked. The fear was pulling darkness in. He was struggling to see straight because he was so scared.

“Brent? We’re almost there. We can help him, all right? It’s going to be fine; he’s going to be all right,” Celia told him, just loud enough to be heard over the hoofbeats.

Feeling his chest tighten, Brent tried to breathe. He considered what she had just said.

What was she thinking? That made no sense; there was no way for them to know what was going on or what would happen to Liam.

After all, he realized, she hardly knew anything about his son. It had only been a few days since she had arrived. Making assumptions like that were liable to get someone hurt, or worse.

He shook his head and grimaced. “All right? Fine? What does that even mean?”

When she looked over at him, she didn’t say anything. She opened her mouth and then closed it.

Did she realize her mistake? Or was she still thinking about it? He

gritted his teeth as he tried to imagine what was going through her mind.

The one thing he knew was that she was wrong.

Brent went on. "What do you even know about Liam? Were you even paying attention when I was telling you about the children?

"Liam is fragile! He needs help all the time. He gets sick easily! What are you thinking? You don't know him; you can't say that."

It was hard to explain the hard feelings welling up within him. But once he started talking, he couldn't stop.

The words were rather hurtful; Brent knew it as he said them, and yet they slipped off his tongue one after another.

If he couldn't guess what had been wrong, then the hurt expression in Celia's face would have done it for him. She wore a soft frown before looking away.

The glimmer in her eyes made his breath halt. If he didn't know better, he would think that had been a tear.

What was wrong with him?

He opened his mouth and then clamped it shut. While he wanted to apologize, that was where he struggled to speak.

Besides, the darkness inside him was touched by shame for what he had just said to Celia.

But there wasn't time to apologize.

Brent whipped around to face the front of his horse. His son had to come first right then and he couldn't waste time correcting his words. Something could be said to Celia later.

First, he had to make sure that his son was all right.

They turned down the road and he led the way. It wasn't hard now to spot the doctor's home because a group of people lingered outside, talking to each other and whispering.

They didn't stop when he pulled up short and jumped off his horse. He paused, thinking about Celia, and wondered about leaving her out here.

He could have told her that she didn't need to be there. The words '*you're not really his mother*' came to mind.

They tasted sour on his tongue and he swallowed, swearing to never say this to Celia.

She was a mother now, married to him and tending to the children. This was the role she had readily accepted, one that he had asked her to take on.

She deserved to be treated better and he knew this. He just had to start thinking clearly.

Brent decided he would do that later. He had to check in on his son first, to make sure he was still alive.

So long as Liam didn't die, Brent told himself that everything would be fine.

Celia slid out of the saddle and hurriedly rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands before moving around her horse to join Brent on the steps of the doctor's house.

Ever since Annie Mae had explained why she had come to them, Celia had felt uneasy. It was a horrible feeling that grew from the pit of her stomach.

Fearing for Brent and the children, she had tried to overcome the uncertainty. She had seen the fear on his face, after all.

She couldn't imagine what it was like inside his mind at that moment. She didn't want to. He and the children had already been through so much.

It worried her that he never seemed to take time for himself. Even their adventure today by the waterfall had been for her.

There was little she could do. She knew this.

Still, Celia told herself that she couldn't just stand there. This was her family now and she was wholeheartedly invested. She wanted to be here and she wanted to be able to help them.

That was all she had been trying to do.

When she saw the look in Brent's eyes on their ride toward town, Celia could hardly stand to see him like that.

He looked like an injured animal, cornered and desperate. The pain in his heart had to be so big even though they didn't know much about what had happened to Liam.

But she supposed that was what made it so bad, the not knowing.

Celia dropped her hands down to her sides to look over at Brent. He simply flung his rope around the post, not bothering to tie it, before taking the three stairs in one large step to move himself up onto the porch.

Was she to follow? She hesitated. Though she didn't expect him to turn back for her, she momentarily wasn't sure if she would be welcome.

Especially after what he had just said to her.

Celia told herself that Brent couldn't possibly have meant what he'd said to her in the saddle. It was clear that the man was frantic. She had seen the fear in his eyes, had she not?

Fear made people do all sorts of things.

She acknowledged this, but that didn't stop her heart from feeling a little wounded. All she wanted to do was help. Surely, he had to understand this.

It hurt that his first reaction was to jab her with his words. Celia wondered if she had been out of line to speak in the first place.

There was no way for her to know in that moment, or possibly ever. Celia inhaled deeply and tried to push the pain away. This wasn't about her.

She was worried about Liam, too. He was a sweet little boy with the most beautiful smile.

A lump formed in her throat. She didn't want to imagine him in any other way.

Hastening after Brent to the door, she prayed there was still hope for the young boy.

Her husband wrestled with the handle for a moment before bursting through the doorway. She followed after, hurrying into the room.

The room was full. It was a small room with chairs to one side and a cot against the far side along a table with a black bag and a sink.

This was certainly a doctor's room, for she knew them all too well. She could smell the undiluted alcohol and other medicines but tried not to think too much about them.

On the cot was little Liam.

Celia could tell that much, though it was a little tricky to see his face. All of the other children were gathered there, along with the doctor.

She looked at each of them: Penelope, Mary, and Lily. They were all terrified, with big eyes.

It broke her heart. She knew right away that they had to fear the

worst.

The thing with tragedies, Celia understood now, was that they never really went away. To her, the pain merely became more bearable with time.

What no one would talk about, however, was how the fear of repeating the past always lingered.

Sometimes she felt a stirring in her stomach, as though there was a child growing within her. But they were phantom movements that only caused her discomfort and heartache, thinking about the babies that could have been.

Those movements were small and simple moments where she thought she was healing, but then something like that would happen and make her fall apart all over again like she had just been broken.

She had come to accept that this was merely the way her life would be. The problem now was she was seeing how the children were facing this fear and pain, as well; while she believed herself to be strong enough to endure, they didn't deserve this.

A lump formed in her throat. Celia stood there frozen for a moment, feeling slightly dazed as she realized she wasn't alone in this sort of pain.

It didn't quite make her feel better.

Brent rushed across the room over to his son's side, leaning over to gently check on the child. His breathing was loud in the quiet room.

As the doctor stood up and glanced over at Celia, she started forward. She was a part of this family now, wasn't she?

She swallowed hard before stepping over. Even Mary scooted aside to let her through.

As she reached the family and looked down at Liam, the doctor started to talk. She gave the little boy a hopeful smile.

He was pale and clammy-looking. But no blood, no broken bones. They just had to hope that whatever was in him wouldn't harm him.

"It's going to be alright," the doctor explained to them patiently. He washed his hands and then patted the boy's forehead. "I believe it was unnecessary panic. He ate some bad food, is all.

"There are no signs of anything more serious than a stomachache. While the boy is ill, he is going to be fine. He's strong and just needs to rest up and drink some water."

Celia heard the collective sighs of relief intermingled with her own in the room.

Putting her hand over her heart, she turned to Liam with a glad smile. He tried to return it and then winced, putting his hands over his stomach with a soft groan.

"I feel like I'm dying," he pronounced out loud.

She felt the tension build up in the room. When Lily started to whimper, Celia reached down to take the girl's hand and comfort her. The poor child had been through so much.



Though Liam was only expressing himself, perhaps his choice of verbiage was not the best for this particular situation with all of them gathered there.

Crouching down by the cot, Brent rubbed his hand tenderly over the boy's stomach. Liam winced and sniffled before pouting.

"You're not dying," Brent told him in a calm voice. Then, he glanced at the other children.

"It's going to be fine. I promise. You're just sick from food, then, Liam. That's all. It will go away before nightfall."

Liam shifted uncomfortably. "Are you sure?"

Nodding, Brent answered, "Of course. But what happened? What did you eat that made you ill?"

A hundred ideas ran through Celia's mind. She had stopped her nieces and nephews in their early ages from eating all sorts of things that weren't quite food.

There had been beads and dirt and toys and rubbish. Something had happened that had made the boy want to eat it, whatever it had been.

Everyone looked at Liam expectantly

The boy hesitated. He glanced at his hands and then mumbled, "Nothing. Just the cake."

Celia straightened up, not certain that she had heard right. Her brow furrowed as she tried to understand what he meant. It couldn't have been her cake, could it?

Everyone had enjoyed one slice that morning, and no one else seemed ill. This couldn't be. Could it?

"Celia's cake?" Lily piped up.

Little Liam nodded. He then groaned and curled up in a ball.

Both of his hands wrapped around Brent's so that his father was trapped there. It didn't stop Brent from frowning and looking up at her.

He wasn't the only one. She could feel all of them looking at her, even the doctor.

Swallowing hard, Celia spluttered as she tried to find something to say. That sounded absurd, after all. It had to be. Her cake?

She had made it perfectly, like she always had. There was no way it could have done anything bad.

But there was poor Liam with his stomach pains.

"I don't know," she started before feeling her courage fail her. "How is that...? Oh, Liam. You didn't eat anything else? I'm so sorry.

"I didn't want you to get sick. The cake, it's just a normal recipe. It's never made anyone sick before. I wouldn't..."

Celia fell quiet when Lily wrestled her hand free from her.

The girl pouted fiercely at her, shaking her head and stepping back in Penelope's arms. Tears quickly started streaming down the youngest girl's cheeks.

“You made Liam sick. Now he’s dying. Why? Why did you hurt Liam? Do you want to hurt me, too?” she started wailing.

Blanching at such a terrible thought, Celia stepped back. She shook her head while looking around the room. They couldn’t possibly believe this was her fault, could they?

But how could they not? She was starting to believe this herself.

“Lily, calm down,” Brent said. His voice was calm and measured. “It wasn’t on purpose.

“Don’t attack her like that. We just need to be grateful that, well, Liam is safe. He’s going to be just fine.”

Her eyes flitted over to him with relief. Except as she had hoped to share silent gratitude with him, Celia found that he wouldn’t look at her.

She remembered how he had talked to her on the way into town. He had been so upset.

Even as he tried to calm down his children now, did he believe her? Or was he just trying to keep them calm?

“I don’t want Liam to die,” Lily cried. “Or be sick. Why, Celia?”

“I don’t know,” Celia stammered. She took a step back and then another. It was as if she was again being told that she didn’t belong here.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. I didn’t mean to. I never thought... I’m sorry. I—I need some air.”

Once she had backed up against the door, she grabbed the handle and hurried out.

Most of the people had dispersed from in front of the house. It was just her on the porch as she gasped for breath.

Celia's mind was reeling as she heard Lily's tragic voice over and over in her mind.

It felt like God was telling her she wasn't supposed to have children. Just another painful reminder that put her into tears.

Celia wiped her eyes and blinked, trying to figure out what to do with herself here. If she was this bad of a mother, then surely she didn't belong there.

The children deserved to be happy and healthy and safe.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Celia prayed for her mistakes to go away.

**B**rent felt as though he'd just finished a long day out on the ranch.

The reality of the matter was that he had hardly done any work; there was a lot for him to do once they made it home. Just thinking about it made the list grow and grow.

Clearing his throat, he sighed and shook his head. Then he looked up onto his horse where Liam and Mary rode in the saddle together.

It was a tight fit, just like it was for Penelope and Lily in Celia's saddle.

Though their home was in sight now, no one was smiling or even talking.

The short trip over to the doctor's home had done them all in. His children looked tired, slumped in their seats and hardly looking around.

Every one of them enjoyed riding, but now they didn't care.

Brent looked back to the road with a sigh as he told himself that everything was going to be fine. It was just an accident.

He still wasn't sure he understood exactly what had taken place, but he wasn't going to bother about it now. All he wanted to do was get them all home. After that, they could worry.

While his wife walked alongside him, he hadn't been able to bring himself to look at her yet. The children were easier to handle and talk to since he knew them so well.

But this? Her? Now?

His mind spun as he tried to think about how he was going to talk to Celia about this. He struggled to figure out what to even think about what had happened.

When she ran out of the doctor's room, he hadn't followed her. He couldn't leave the children, especially Liam. The boy hadn't let go of him and Brent wasn't about to let go first.

Yet it hadn't changed the fact that he knew she was upset.

Brent had stayed behind. He had left her on her own so he could take care of the children.

The doctor had some advice for him to help with Liam and ease his discomfort for the next couple of hours. After that, he had still needed to stay to calm Lily down.

She had been disastrously upset, crying hard when Celia ran off.

His throat constricted at the memory; that wasn't something he was able to do. He was the one who had raised these children.

They relied on him.

Running off was never an option and they all knew it. All at once, Brent was both jealous and frustrated with Celia for having done that while the children were falling apart.

They finally reached the house.

He sighed in relief and led the way over to the barn doors. His horse stopped there and waited as he scooped up one child after the other one. Liam and then Mary came.

Though Celia had brought her horse to a stop as well, Lily turned away from her. He watched in dismay as Penelope slid down and then reached up for her sister.

It was a struggle, but they made it.

Once on the ground, the girls linked arms and ducked their heads before starting toward the house.

Celia took a step toward them before stopping as though she knew how useless it was to go after them. He watched, unable to look away, his heart feeling tight.

It was just one disaster after another.

Feeling like he was still trying to catch up from the last mess, Brent motioned for Celia to head into the house. He took the reins from her so he could put the horses away.

For a second, he thought about all the work that still needed to be done. But after this scare, he wasn't sure he would be able to concentrate.

Brent took his time, feeling a little sluggish now after his race into town. Knowing the children were safe again brought him only a little bit of comfort.

It didn't fix every issue of theirs, after all.

The future of figuring this out with his children and his wife seemed to grow more daunting by the minute.

He slowly made his way up to the house. A heavy weight rested upon his shoulders. Ruffling his hair, Brent tried to work out something to say to his children.

He couldn't believe Celia would want to hurt any one of them. It made no sense. But how was he supposed to get his children to understand this?

Stepping inside, he looked up to find Liam crossing the hall to go into his bedroom. There was the sound of a soft moan before a soft thump as the boy dropped into his bed to rest after what he had just been through.

"I promise," he heard Celia saying, "it's just water. You must be thirsty."

"How are we supposed to know that?" Mary asked loudly.

Brent made his way into the kitchen to figure out what was going on. The children sounded angry and Celia was nearly in tears. He stepped in the room to find this to be exactly the case.

His wife glanced at him with hollow eyes and the most devastated look he had ever seen. After all of their kind letters, after their perfect morning by the waterfall, it broke Brent's heart to see her



like this.

There was a redness around her eyes that emphasized she had recently cried; she must have done so quietly because he hadn't seen her.

A lump formed in his throat.

Turning to the children, he noticed how far they seemed to be trying to create a divide between them and her. Lily and Mary were holding hands while Penelope just had her arms crossed and her gaze down as though she was scared.

Were they all scared of Celia?

"I don't want water. Or cake! I don't want anything," Lily cried out.

The young girl stomped her foot for good measure. Then, uncertain that it had been enough, stomped her foot two more times and jutted her chin out.

"You don't have to," Celia said while straightening up. She left the water cups on the table and stepped back.

She glanced again at Brent before noisily gulping. "I promise. It was a mistake, it must have been. All of you had some this morning, remember?"

Mary gasped in realization and clapped a hand over her mouth. "She poisoned all of us," she cried out in a muffled voice.

In that moment, Brent was done.

He couldn't stand to dance around the issue. This was going on for too long; he was tired and done with this trouble.

The stress was getting to him and listening to his children complain wasn't helping his mood.

Pursing his lips, he gestured to the hall. "That's enough. Everyone needs to go to their rooms now. Now, please," he added when the girls only looked up at him through wide eyes.

The three of them paused to share glances with one another. He could hardly guess what was going on through their minds right then.

But it didn't matter; he needed a moment away from them so he could clear his mind and figure out how to deal with the situation in a proper manner.

That was the thing about parenthood: there was no time to prepare.

Mary huffed but otherwise the girls didn't say a word. Leading the way, Penelope fiddled with her hands before disappearing down the hall.

Mary and Lily were still holding hands when they went off. He watched and waited until he heard the doors respectfully close.

"Brent, I truly don't know how this happened."

Looking away from the hall, he saw the worried look on Celia's face.

She was holding her hands while biting her lip. There appeared to

be a weight on her shoulders, as well, so heavy he could practically see it pushing down on her.

He rubbed his face, nodding.

Ransacking his mind for ideas, Brent let out another sigh. He didn't know what to do.

He was tired and just wanted one day without trouble. Would that ever happen? All he wanted to do was climb into bed and pretend this day had never happened.

Or, he considered as he thought of their time at the waterfall, he just wanted to know what to do. But everything was harder than it looked. He wanted to support his children and his wife.

Couldn't there be a way to do both? Though he tried to think about how he had faced problems with Nicole, nothing memorable came to mind.

"I'm sorry," Celia said. She took a small step toward him and then hesitated. "Please, Brent. You believe me, don't you? I need to know."

He forced a jerky nod. He was mostly sure that he believed her. What sort of person would harm a child, after all?

That didn't make any sense. And Brent believed that he knew her well enough that she wouldn't do such a thing. She wouldn't do it on purpose, at least.

"Of course you didn't," Brent started to say to her. "I'm sure they just..."

His gaze finally made it over to the corner counter where something caught his eye. There were two lumps under a towel on the counter.

It was the crumbs that made him curious, so he walked over.

When he tugged the towel off, his eyes widened in shock.

Coming up from behind him, Celia saw what he was doing; a gasp escaped her lips.

There were the two molasses cakes that she had made that morning. She had mentioned having made two cakes when she and the children came over to visit him before school.

The cake on the right was neatly cut to show where it was missing slices and was nearly half gone. As for the cake on the left, that was another story.

It had never been cut, but large portions of it were missing. He could tell it had to have been someone without a knife because they hadn't eaten the bottom layer, instead sticking to the top.

There was also a crumbly outline of a handprint set neatly between the two cakes, surrounded by more crumbs.

The majority of the cake was gone, and now he realized where it was.

"Oh..." Celia murmured.

Brent stared as the realization sunk in. His son had eaten so much of it that he must have made himself sick. The truth sunk in his stomach.

Closing his eyes, he let out a small groan. It was Liam's fault all along.

He wasn't sure what he had hoped the truth would be. No matter what, it wouldn't leave any of them happy or very satisfied.

Brent thought about this for a minute and only found himself growing more frustrated over what had just happened. He was mad at himself for not handling the situation better and upset that this was a problem in the first place.

Something had to be done.

Mind spinning, Brent whirled around to make his way down into the hall. "I'll be right back. Kids? Come out here. Mary and Penelope, out. Lily?

"Liam? If you can sit up, then you can come out here for a minute. I'm calling a family meeting and I need everyone out here now."

He knocked loudly on their doors before returning to the kitchen. Ccelia still stood in the corner by the ruined cake, her brow furrowed.

"Is she leaving?" Mary piped up as they trickled in.

"No, she is not," he responded, pursing his lips. "Take a seat. All of you. We need to talk about this. About everything.

"It won't take long, Liam, so I need you to pay attention and then you can go back to bed."

Penelope opened her mouth and then closed it before hiding her face in her arms. The twins glanced at her and then Mary for

guidance.

It was Mary who crossed her arms and frowned at all of them.

Inhaling deeply, Brent tried to find the right words to say. Emotions rushed through him and he started talking. “I will keep this short.

“This is clearly about what happened today, but it’s also about the last couple of days. And the rest of our lives, I suppose. Because Celia is here to stay. She is my wife and she is staying.”

“But Liam almost died,” Lily said with a wobbling chin.

“No, he didn’t. He ate so much food that he made himself sick. He got into the cake that Celia was nice enough to make for all of us, and ate until he grew ill.

“Now, Celia didn’t have to make that cake. She hasn’t had to do much of anything here. She doesn’t even need to be nice to you, but she has been.

“Since the moment she arrived—no, since she first learned all your names—Celia has been a kind and wonderful motherly figure.”

Mary snorted as though she wanted to say something. He frowned at her until she dropped her gaze to the floor.

Brent carried on. “I mean it. Now that she’s here, now that she is trying hard every day for each of you, I expect better behavior moving forward.

“Each one of you needs to begin treating her with respect and with kindness. Is that understood? Celia is a wonderful woman and she

deserves to be treated thusly.”

Hearing a snuffle, he darted his gaze around at the children. But none of them were crying. So, he turned to Celia, who was wiping a tear off her cheek.

She managed an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, I just... Those words were so kind.”

Immediately, Brent recalled the way he had treated her on their way into town. He winced. He pulled back a chair and helped her into it.

“Celia, I said a few not-so-kind words on our way to see the children. I shouldn’t have said that, even though I was stressed and scared.

“I’m sorry about what I said; I didn’t mean any of it,” he added.

As she sat down, Celia nodded. She appeared to struggle to find the right words to say as her breath caught.

Brent paused to look at the children. They were all staring in disbelief.

He left that alone while he turned back to Celia. Before he could find anything more to say, he heard the scraping of a chair.

Everyone looked as Penelope slowly walked around the table and then offered her a small handkerchief for her tears. He stood still, watching without being able to tear his eyes away from the tender moment between them.

Celia nodded her thanks, the two of them quietly moving back to

their separate seats.

Lily was still beside Liam, the two of them whispering. He wasn't too worried about them. But then there was Mary, who leaned back in her seat.

The girl looked around before scrambling out to walk over to Celia's other side.

He watched curiously.

Having expected them to leave in a huff, Brent hardly knew how to respond to his children, all of a sudden.

The young girl glanced at him for half a second before focusing on his wife.

Mary wavered as though losing her confidence. But then she nodded to herself and put a small hopeful smile on her face.

"Celia? I can still teach you how to use a lasso if you want. We can do that together. Do you...?" Mary asked shyly.

Brent froze in surprise, not having expected that. He glanced at Mary and then at Celia. His wife rubbed her nose before looking at the young girl curiously.

A moment later, she started to smile.

"Yes. Thank you, Mary. I would like that," Celia murmured.

It felt as though that weight on his shoulders was suddenly beginning to lift. Brent took a step back, resting his hands on his hips. He swallowed while glancing around at his little family.



They had a lot to work through, but maybe they could manage it.  
Maybe things were about to start looking up.

**I**t seemed like a good time, Mary thought, to go practice with her lasso.

Why not? She wasn't doing anything now and she supposed that she wasn't really in trouble. Her father was upset, but he was relaxing. His eyes always widened when he did that.

So Mary turned her attention back to Celia.

The woman cried a lot.

This annoyed Mary, until she remembered that she cried a lot, too. It wasn't fair, then, to be mad at someone for doing what she did.

Then she thought of how hard Liam had cried; he had cried so hard even though it was really just a bad stomach ache.

She looked around the room, waiting for something to happen.

It was Celia who moved first. She stood up and went to the water spout to wash her face. While there, she filled a cup of water for herself to drink.

Glancing at her father, Mary found that he looked slightly surprised. What was he thinking?

Most of the time, he seemed to know everything. But she had begun to notice there were moments where he really didn't seem to know anything. It puzzled her.

Footsteps sounded by the table.

Mary turned to find her sisters moving away. They had their heads down low, holding hands as they went off down the hall.

For a second, she nearly followed after them. It was out of habit more than anything else. But she stopped when she remembered the offer that she had just made to her stepmother.

She didn't like that word.

Tommy Lawrence had teased her at school that morning when he said he heard she had a stepmother. The other boys had started to chime in.

Everyone knew the fairytales. They teased her and her siblings, saying that they would probably disappear soon.

Never would she allow anyone to do that to her.

Her father mumbled something about going to check on Liam. Mary stayed there, waiting awkwardly for Celia to finish up so they could go outside.

The sunlight was bright on her face. Squinting, she glanced around them before looking up at her stepmother as the woman closed the door behind them.

Then Mary hesitated, cheated a quick look up at her, and then hurriedly looked down. She didn't want Celia to know that she had been staring.

Determined to still not like Celia, Mary marched down the steps without looking her way. She felt silly inside for helping out the woman. It wasn't her fault that Celia was in tears, was it?

But she didn't like seeing people cry; making that effort had felt like the only thing she could do.

She moved along down the trail. She refused to look back, but kept slowing down to make sure that she was still being followed.

"It's a beautiful evening, don't you think?" Celia asked in the silence.

Mary shrugged. It was nice outside and not too hot. But beautiful? She wouldn't call the weather that.

She brushed a hand through her hair. All she had meant to do was put it over her shoulders. It always seemed to be messy by the end of the day.

Her gaze caught on the light color. It was blond, much like her mother's had been. That connection was something Mary had always loved because no one else in the family shared it.

Now, her mother was gone. In her place was someone else.

Mary couldn't explain why it irritated her that Celia had light hair, but it did. It was exactly as though the woman had come here and tried to play the part of mother.

Was their family supposed to pretend that they'd never had a mother before?

She remembered that night when she woke up in tears and her father had held her. He had promised that he wasn't forgetting his first wife. Had that been a lie?

For a second, she wanted to shear off all her hair.

But that wouldn't fix everything. Mary reminded herself of that, walking over to the barn. She pushed the door open a little more widely before stepping through. But there were no footsteps.

She turned around to find Celia looking at the barn. The woman hesitated before glancing over at her. She didn't look happy.

"We're riding?" she asked hesitantly.

That was a ridiculous question. Clearly, no one had told her about how to use a lasso.

It was true one could easily do the work on the ground, but few did that. People were usually riding when they needed to do a lasso.

"Of course. You can lasso on the ground, but that's different. You learn to do it standing and then it's like you have to relearn it in the saddle.

"But when you learn in the saddle, then you'll be able to do it on the ground easily," Mary explained. She led the way inside and stopped in front of a stall before turning to narrow her eyes.

"You can ride, can't you?"

The stepmother followed after her. Celia opened her mouth and then paused before giving her answer.

“Yes, I can. I actually just learned this morning,” she admitted with a slight smile. “I may not be very good at it, you know.”

Mary blinked. She wasn’t surprised because for a second, she didn’t believe the woman. But Celia didn’t laugh or anything.

They looked at each other and Mary wondered what Celia was up to. This would have been funny if she had figured out what her stepmother was really like.

Not wanting to make a big deal out of it, though, she quickly turned to look away. A moment of silence swept between them.

She hurriedly tried to think about something else to say so they could move on.

“I’ll saddle my horse and you can saddle yours. Then I’ll get the lassos,” Mary said decidedly. She gave a nod before slipping into the stall.

Taking care of her horse, Thunder, was one of her favorite things to do. Her horse was fast and friendly and strong. He was four years old.

One of their neighbors had died, and while he didn’t have any family, he had a few horses. Everyone who helped to clean up the property and give it to the pastor in town ended up with a few minor gifts. Her father had been gifted the man’s new colt.

And now the horse was hers.

Mary had to use a stool in order to ready Thunder, but she didn't mind. She knew one day she would be tall. If she was lucky, she'd be able to tower over everyone in town, maybe even the boys.

It didn't take her long to saddle her horse; once done, she led the creature out and glanced in the next stall.

Little progress was seen there. Even if Celia had learned to ride, she certainly didn't know how to prepare a horse for riding. She felt bad for Goldie having to put up with this.

She shook her head in dismay. "You're doing it wrong."

"Oh!" Celia jumped. She hurriedly straightened up and, clutching her heart, turned to see Mary. "What did you say?"

Mary patted her horse's nose and then walked into the stall. They weren't large and it immediately felt crowded. But she set the annoyance aside to hasten this situation along.

"Here. It goes like this. Then you have to nudge them because they like to hold in breath so it's not so tight. But if it's not tight, then you fall off."

Mary spoke clearly with a hint of something else in her voice.

A flush crept up Celia's face but she said nothing of it. Instead, she nodded. "Thank you," she said when Goldie was ready.

Mary shrugged and said nothing. The two of them then walked out of the barn with their animals. Only then did they climb onto their animals.

She paused to watch Celia. The woman furrowed her brow in

concentration as she grabbed the saddle with both hands. Then she nodded to herself, amusing Mary.

Putting a foot in the stirrup, Celia gave it her all and managed to land in the saddle. Her eyes widened as though in surprise that she had been able to do this.

It was too silly to ignore. Mary chuckled and it turned quickly into a laugh. Shaking her head, she mounted her horse in one swift motion.

“You sure must have learned today; you look silly doing that,” Mary told her. She grinned, unable to resist, and then started leading the way down the trail.

They made their way down to the next grassy knoll. It made for a beautiful view and it was one of her favorite places to practice her skills. She just hoped her stepmother didn't ruin this for her.

Mary knew how silly this was. Why was she helping Celia when she didn't even like the woman? But she didn't have an answer for that question.

She surveyed the area thoughtfully for a moment, feeling a breeze tickle her neck.

“All right, I'm ready to learn,” Celia announced to Mary. “You're the teacher now. What do I do, Mary?”

Mary looked over in confusion; she hadn't thought of it like this. But Celia had a point. Her eyes widened in surprise, tilting her head up.

“I suppose I am teaching you... Well, let me show you what I can



do. Then I'll show you how to do it."

When Celia nodded, Mary moved back and pulled out her lasso. Her heart pounded with excitement.

This was one of her favorite things to do. She would do it all the time if her father would let her.

She explained a little about it before looking at a nearby post. Pulling up the rope, she soon had it turning in circles. It didn't take long before the lasso was wrapped around the post tightly.

"That was wonderful!" Celia clapped from behind her. "You're going to make a wonderful cowgirl, Mary. That was very impressive."

Mary stiffened. She turned around to see the woman's face. What did she mean by that? Was it a mean joke?

But Celia hadn't said anything out loud that was mean yet. Mary tried to make sense of this.

She pursed her lips together for a moment before asking, "You mean, I can be one someday? You won't make me stop when I'm older?"

"Of course not! Mary, why would I do that? I'm only here to help. To help you grow. To help you be happy. To help you have fun, even. I would never want to hurt you.

"It's clear you love being outside; if you want to be a cowgirl, I'll do whatever I can to help you become one."

Listening to Celia say this made Mary's throat constrict. She hadn't

heard anyone say anything that nice in a long time.

“Oh. Well, thanks. You’re not... like the other mothers,” Mary said slowly, feeling the need to explain herself. She was still trying to understand how it was possible for Celia to talk like this.

Did her stepmother mean those words?

Celia smiled as she spoke. “No, I suppose I’m not. I have a lot less experience, don’t you think?” That made Mary’s lip twitch in amusement. “But I won’t let that stop me.

“I’ll keep trying. And, if you like, you can help me do better. However, I think it might be easiest to start off by teaching me how to lasso.”

It took Mary a moment to respond. She had no idea how to react to this and needed to think. She didn’t know if she should believe her stepmother again.

The two of them proceeded to spend time out under the setting sun so Mary could teach Celia how to use the ropes. The woman was stiff and not very good.

But she really tried, it was obvious on her face. They stayed out longer than Mary usually did, discussing how to best lasso that post.

They conceded a while later when their arms began to ache. They took the horses back to the barn and brushed them down.

Just like the walk there, neither of them had much of anything to say to each other.

They soon started back to the house in silence. Celia carried a lantern so they wouldn't risk falling down.

Mary felt the woman look at her a few times. But what did she want to say? There was quiet all around them until they were halfway to the house. Then, Celia cleared her throat.

"Mary?" Once she glanced up, Mary took a deep breath and continued. "I... I just want you to know that I would never want to hurt you or see you hurt.

"I may have married your father, but I'm not here to replace your mother. No one can ever do that. I mean what I said earlier: I just want to be here to help take care of you and your siblings.

"I want to give you everything you need. Hopefully, with time, I can prove that to you."

The girl looked up at her with wide eyes.

She didn't know how to react. Her body was tingling all over and her stomach churned. But they had been nice words, she thought. Very kind words.

Hoping that they were the truth, Mary slowly nodded her head. She couldn't seem to remember how to talk.

But she considered the feelings growing within her and found herself wondering about her stepmother.

Maybe, she thought, there was room for Celia in their family.

Celia awoke early with Brent the following morning.

They talked quietly with smiles on their faces as they dressed and then left the room to get started on their day.

While he headed out to work on the ranch, Celia tied an apron around her waist and started to prepare fresh eggs and ham for the family to eat.

Even though they'd had a rainstorm, it was going to be a lovely day, she decided.

She hummed while moving around, feeling relaxed in a way that she hadn't in a long time. There was no tension in her shoulders and no irritation in her mind.

She doubted she could take the smile off her face if she tried.

And why would she want to do such a thing?

While she cut the ham into reasonable chunks, her mind wandered. She thought back to the day before. It had been such a whirlwind of emotions.

There had been the tender kiss with Brent at the waterfall, the panic in town with Liam, and then her afternoon with Mary.

Maybe life wasn't quite perfect, but she could live with that if there were good moments like that interspersed between them.

Her heart sang as she remembered how she had crawled into bed and excitedly told Brent all that had happened with her and Mary. In the darkness, Brent had wrapped his arms around her and listened as she talked on and on.

He was a good man, she knew, with good children.

How had she become so fortunate?

She shook her head with a silly grin on her lips as she finished up the last of the eggs. Everything was set on the table.

Since she had finished a few minutes early, Celia cleaned up the pan and tidied the room.

Next to her in the hall was a small table. It was dusty and had a few envelopes on it. She picked up a towel and rubbed it before realizing that this was the mail.

Before they returned home from the doctor's yesterday, Brent had them stop by the post office.

This would all belong to him, of course. She gathered the papers and took them into their bedroom.

Four letters seemed like a lot to her. Though she didn't open them, she glanced through to see who they might be from.

But she forgot all the others when she saw her name on one.

Her heart dropped. Mouth open, Celia stared in shock as she recognized her ex-husband's handwriting.

Richard had always written rather clumsily. But, as usual, he had added a small heart over the 'i.'

What was this about?

She looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was in the hall nearby. Gulping, she dropped the other letters and opened hers up.

Why was Richard writing to her? And how did he know where she was?

*My dearest Celia—*

*Your father told me you had not only left town, but left to marry another man. He told me this after I came looking for you.*

*I wish you hadn't. Why couldn't you give me more time? I miss you. I've been so lonely without you. I should have never left you in the first place.*

*I want you back, Celia. I don't need children. I have a house on the coast and I want you. That's all.*

Richard went on to explain this in more scatter-brained details. It took her three reviews before she was certain about what he was writing to her about.

He wanted her back. She held the letter close to her chest while she remembered the way he used to smile at her.

A house on the coast meant a wagon ride from her parents' home. It was what Celia had wanted for so long, though they had never been able to make that happen.

What had changed for him?

Surely, Richard seemed to be a changed man. He said they could raise orphans, too, instead of having their own children.

It all felt like a dream. There he was, the first man she had married, telling her all the things that she had always wanted to hear. His handwriting was clumsy, but his words were tender.

She stood there for a long minute, trying to imagine having all of this like he had once promised her so many years ago.

If she went back to Richard, then she would be close to her parents. It would be a lie to say that she hadn't missed them, along with her siblings and their families. They knew her so well.

And then she could adopt children with Richard, children who needed her and wanted her. The thought of going to children who weren't scared or annoyed by her was almost tempting.

"No."

Inhaling sharply, Celia suddenly came to her senses.

How could she think of doing something like that?

She felt shame wash over her as she shook her head in answer to Richard's letter. There was no way that she could go back and pretend that nothing had happened.

After all, she wasn't married to him.

Shaking her head in disappointment for even considering leaving, she picked the letter back up. Everything about it felt so wrong.

She started to scrunch it up in a small ball to toss it away, but then changed her mind.

Maybe she wouldn't go back to Richard, but she could at least let him know her answer. They had been married and a great fondness for him still laid within her heart.

She wanted to get this sorted out right away. Glancing around the bedroom, she found herself a pen and paper.

Crouched on the ground, she penned a quick response to let him know that they would never have a future again.

It hurt to write the words, Celia found, and yet she felt relief when she finished and signed it with her name. Now she was truly closing the door in their relationship.

She didn't want any sort of life with Richard anymore. All she wanted was Brent.

And with him, she wanted Penelope and Mary and Lily and Liam.

Though she had not been there long, Celia felt connected to all of them. She loved the children and her husband in a way she hadn't thought possible.

Perhaps Richard had been the right man for her at one point in her life, but she was beyond that point now. And Celia couldn't be more glad of it.



She folded the letter and tucked it into her apron so that she could see about getting it sent off later. The one from Richard was set in the other pocket since she didn't know if she should throw it away or burn it.

The situation was handled.

Celia left the bedroom humming once more as she went to wake the children. It was time for them to eat. She knocked on their doors and checked to make sure Liam was feeling better.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

To prove himself, Liam climbed back onto his bed and started to jump. "Yeah! See? I'm all better! I'm so hungry. Can we eat now, Mama?"

Her lips parted in surprise, wondering if she had heard right. She looked around, but Lily didn't seem to have heard and Liam hadn't noticed. Her heart did a small flip.

It must have been an accident, Celia thought to herself. But that didn't stop her heart from growing warm at the way the young boy had called her by that special name.

Glancing up at the ceiling, she apologized to Nicole in her mind.

Hopefully, the woman wouldn't be upset.

"I'm glad you're doing well. That means you can help me clean up the kitchen after we finish eating," Celia said teasingly. "Now, come along. I'm hungry, too. If we don't hurry, everyone will eat without us."

“No!”

Liam rushed past her in a blur.

She held back a grin, trying not to laugh as she followed after him. She took off her apron and hung it up.

The children were sitting down and Brent was working with Mary to pour water into everyone's cups. The young girl talked about her silly dreams and hardly stopped during the entire meal.

As they ate, Celia looked around. Her heart felt so full.

She ate with the family and was so glad everyone was so happy. Everyone ate the delicious food quickly and were helping to clean up before she was even finished.

Just as she stood to take her plate away, Celia heard a loud gasp. She turned with the thought that perhaps Mary had seen a cute animal outside the window.

Instead, the young girl was holding a familiar crumpled letter.

Brent was washing his hands when he looked over to see

Mary suddenly burst into tears. His eyes widened and everyone else stopped to stare.

The happy mood in the kitchen immediately deflated.

His hands were still wet as he rushed over to her side. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Confused, he wasn’t sure how to help her. But when she thrust a piece of paper into his hands, he immediately grabbed it.

Brent kneeled to give Mary a tight hug. That was what mattered most, since it didn’t look like she had a bodily injury. Still damp from the rain outside, he hoped she didn’t mind.

He wondered what could be so terrible that it had ruined his family’s most cheerful meal in a long time.

“I...”

He heard Celia stammer, heading over their way, when he glanced back at the paper. Mary didn’t like to read as much as Penelope

did. So why had she burst out crying?

“She lied,” Mary whimpered. Resting her head on his shoulder, she gave a rather devastating whimper. “She lied to all of us. Celia’s leaving us!”

That only confused him more because he had no idea what she was talking about.

Though his hands were still dripping wet, Brent unfolded the page and immediately discovered the answer to his questions. He could see it at the bottom of the page in large letters.

““Love, your husband forever, Richard,”” he quoted.

If it was possible to grow ill over reading just a couple of words, he felt certain it would have happened. His stomach knotted up as he stared in shock.

Glancing over the rest of the letter, he felt his eyes glaze over.

He couldn't deny that this hurt him terribly. How else could he feel? His heart was wounded in a way that it hadn't felt in a long time.

Nicole had left him unwillingly. But Celia? Would she just walk away from this life? Questions flooded his mind as he wondered what would happen next.

It didn't surprise him too much that Richard would want Celia back. Who wouldn't? The man was a fool for letting her leave in the first place.

But she had never mentioned this letter or what she would say.

This made him question everything.

Mary was still crying in his arms. Just when she was coming to good terms with Celia, the woman was trying to leave them.

He held his daughter tightly as she bawled, “She’s leaving! Why does everyone leave? What did we do wrong?”

“Please!” Celia hurried over to them with desperation in her eyes. She looked between the two of them and crouched down with a painful smile.

“No. Mary, I would never leave you. I’m not going anywhere, I promise. Please. You’re my family now. Why would I want to be anywhere else?”

Gulping, Brent tried to pull himself together. Panicking never did anyone any good. Besides, he needed to be strong for his family.

He forced himself to look away from the letter so that he could focus on his wife. The other children were stepping a little closer in order to understand what was going on.

Feeling their gazes on him, he worked to pull himself together. He wished he had all the answers to fix all of this immediately.

“I know it looks bad,” Celia was saying in a hurried voice. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to worry anyone, all right? That’s it. Please, you must allow me to explain myself.

“Richard wrote to me but I don’t want to be with him. This is my home. You’re my family, all of you. Here, let me...”

His wife stepped out of sight from where he held Mary. The young

girl sniffled loudly in his ear.

There was some hasty movement and then Celia was there before them. She clutched another piece of paper, less wrinkled, in both hands.

When Brent looked at her, she offered it to him with tears streaming down her face. Mixed emotions flooded through him.

Bewildered, he reached out for Celia. But she stayed back, leaving only the letter within reach.

“All I ever wanted was a family,” she whispered shakily. “I wanted smart, kind, and beautiful children to take care of like these you’ve shared with me.

“I wouldn’t give that up for anything in the world.”

He tried to stand, but Mary still gripped him. He shifted so that he picked her up in one arm. With the other hand, he straightened out the letter that had just been handed to him and read it.

Immediately, Brent felt regret in his stomach for having allowed an inkling of doubt within him. After all they had been through? What was he thinking?

Celia’s letter was half the length of Richard’s.

She politely thanked him for reaching out and then, after reminding him that he had chosen to divorce her, she said she was happy with the family where she felt she belonged.

The letter ended with her suggestion that it might be best if they didn’t contact each other again for some time.

He felt like a jerk.

Shoulders slumped, Brent knew he should have known she wouldn't consider leaving. She had told him about the end of her relationship with Richard, and just last night, he had discussed with her how happy they were as a family.

"Celia, I..."

But when he looked up to apologize, his wife was gone.

He gently set Mary down on the ground. The young girl whimpered and rubbed her face. "Papa? Where did she go? Is she leaving us?"

"I don't know. No. I mean, no," Brent hastily corrected himself.

Up to this point, Celia would not have just walked away. There was a small part of him that wondered if she would change her mind after learning he didn't have faith in her.

With both letters in his hands, he tried to figure out why that was the case. How could he hurt her like that? A lump formed in his throat.

He needed to do better. The fear didn't belong in his heart.

Maybe he just worried about losing her. His throat constricted. But if that was the case, he couldn't let that fear get in the way of their happiness.

Brent straightened up. He swallowed hard as he accepted his mistakes and told himself that he needed to do better and better. Not just for himself, but for the children and especially his wife.

It was time that he did right by Celia.

“Stay here,” he told the children.

Turning back out into the rain, Brent made his way outside to find her. It took him a minute to find his wife under the nearby tree. She was a blurry figure with her head bent over.

He hurried over to her. Just when he had finally begun to feel a little more dry from his early morning work, he was soaked all over again.

That didn't matter as he rushed to Celia's side to find her drenched and sobbing.

“Celia.” Brent immediately wrapped her up in his arms. “I'm so sorry.”

She jumped slightly before sniffing. Though he held her close, she didn't budge from how she stood with her own arms wrapped around herself.

Grief poured through him as he knew he should have never doubted her.

What had he been thinking?

Caught in this moment, the thought of losing his wife scared him more than he had expected. Celia had immediately become an important part of the family.

Already, he couldn't imagine his life without her.

“I feel like God doesn't want me to be a mother,” Celia cried



against his chest. She hiccuped before slowly moving her arms so that she could hug him. The movement filled him with warmth.

“Nothing gets easier. All I do is make everything worse. Why can’t I do anything right?”

“You are,” Brent responded vehemently. “I made a mistake. It was me. I was scared of losing you, Celia. That’s all. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

“You are meant to be a mother. You’re a wonderful mother. Please don’t leave. We’re just scared. Let me make this right. Please, Celia. Give us another chance.”

They clung to one another for a long moment as she slowly began to catch her breath. One more shaky exhale and then they looked at one another.

He brought his thumb up to brush her tears away.

A watery smile made its way onto Celia’s lips. “I promise I’m not going anywhere, Brent.”

She tilted her head to the side and, after another breath, she stood on the tips of her toes to give him a kiss.

It was a rather wet kiss, but warm and tingling, too. The anxiety growing with him began to fade at last. He held his wife close and prayed this would always be the case for them.

She sighed when they pulled apart. Her forehead rested against his chin as she whispered, “What about Mary? She’ll never trust me now.”

“She will. She’s close to it, too. I can feel it,” he added comfortingly. “She’s just scared, too. Mary blames herself for Nicole’s passing and... I don’t know.

“I’m sure the guilt will go away with time and with love.”

Sniffling, Celia nodded. “Then I’ll just love her even more.”

The days slowly began to pass and Brent could see the changes continue to grow within his family. With winter on the horizon, his main concern became the ranch.

If he had the money, he would have hired someone to help him. Most of the other ranches around the area had at least five men working there no matter the size.

But he wasn't making enough of a profit yet. There was so much work and not enough time.

A few times, he had been tempted to ask Celia to help, but he wouldn't. She had enough on her hands managing the house and the children and the garden.

"Can I help?"

He glanced over his shoulder to find Mary leaning on the barn door. The young girl offered a beaming smile as though to charm her way through to what she wanted.

"Thank you, but no," he told her. "I have to go move the cattle to the far east pasture. It's going to take a while."

Skipping forward, she peeked over his shoulder to see what he was working on. His tools were all falling apart from wear and tear. Truthfully, he needed new ones.

He was fixing his hammer so he could adjust a few nails that were bent out of shape on the fences. It felt like a ridiculous task, but he couldn't get his work done until he had made the repair.

Mary noted that. "That's not a very good hammer. Oh, I know! I can help. You said I'm a good rider. Can I help you tonight?"

Shaking his head, he offered her a sympathetic smile. "Thank you, Mary, but no. You should go back inside and help Celia. I'm sure she could use your support."

It was slowly improving between the two girls. That was what he liked to think, at least, though Celia still voiced her concerns about their relationship.

His daughter couldn't bring herself to trust the new woman in the house.

Time. Brent knew all they needed was time.

Mary huffed and stepped away. "Celia doesn't need me. She likes Penelope more. They're always talking about books, Papa. It's annoying."

"You go riding often, don't you?" he reminded her. His eyes turned to her for a second as he watched her go visit her horse's stall. "Celia went riding with you just the other day.

"She spends time with all of you kids. I'm sorry I can't let you help out here. Say, why don't you feed the horses their supper? Then

you can go and help in the kitchen with ours.”

It was a reasonable compromise for Mary.

He smiled, watching her get to work. He fixed his hammer shortly after she hastened inside so he could finish some of his efforts for the evening.

There was so much that he wanted to get done but the sun was setting.

Once back in the barn to put his tools away, he climbed up the loft and looked over the stacked hay. Sighing, he shook his head. They needed more.

This wasn't going to be enough for when winter came. The harvest was flying by and it wasn't turning out like he had hoped. The drought over the summer had really ruined everything.

The worry had been lingering in the back of his mind. Now, it only grew worse.

This bothered him deeply; just when he thought everything was coming together with his new wife, their way of life seemed to be at risk.

How was he going to take care of them if things went wrong? Without the hay, he couldn't feed his cattle. If he couldn't feed his cattle, they would die and leave him with nothing.

Brent shook his head. He climbed back down the loft and headed to the house.

He would have to buy hay soon if they wanted to survive. Praying

he had the time to make this happen, he made it inside where it was warmly lit with loud voices in the kitchen.

“But I want to sit there!”

“That’s my chair!”

“Liam? It’s all right. Why don’t we let—”

The exhaustion grew with every step as he found the twins fighting over which chair they would sit in for the evening. He could sense the tension in the air.

Looking around, he could see that Mary was egging on the argument and Celia was trying to settle them peacefully.

He clapped his hands together once to get their attention. “Time to calm down. Take the seats you usually sit in. I’m starving.”

When he glanced at Celia, she offered a strained smile and a nod. Perhaps not everything was easy, but at least they could work together.

Everyone sat down to eat, quietly now that he had made himself clear. The children mumbled under their breath but didn’t speak up.

He ate a few spoonfuls of his tasty stew and then looked around. Though the family was eating, they weren’t cheerful like they usually were.

He hesitated as he realized he had made a choice by telling his children what to do. Had he been harsh with his words?

He couldn't remember his tone anymore but it didn't matter; his children clearly thought he was upset.

Pausing to rub his face, Brent sighed.

"I have an idea," Celia suddenly announced. She set her spoon down and looked around at everyone eagerly, including him.

Her smile widened. "We should play some games tonight. We can each choose our favorite games and play them together. What do you think?"

"I want to play," Liam said hurriedly. "Me first!"

Brent mouthed "thank you" to Celia as the children started debating over the games they could play together. He listened and ate quietly, trying to put his worries out of his mind.

Yet he was still thinking about them when he started to help his wife with the dishes. The children ran off to tend to their evening chores in the meantime.

"Should I let you off the hook and send you to bed?" Celia joked awkwardly with a light smile. "You look like you could use a break."

Sighing, he shrugged. "I can think about that later. But thank you.

"I'm just worried about everything right now. There isn't enough hay to make it through the winter, Celia. I'm going to have to buy some."

"We'll make it work," she promised him. "Hand me that plate? If I need to pick up sewing or laundry work in town, then I will.

“I was at the general store today after picking the children up. Mr. Mortenson said he could use some help cleaning up. I would hate to be away, of course, but it’s an option.”

He hated the thought of making her do that. It was his job to provide for his family. “We’ll see. I don’t want us to rush just yet.”

Nodding, she moved away to put the plates back into the cupboard. She put the towel over her shoulder on her way back.

“Oh, Mr. Mortenson also said that a flu has started to go around. Penelope said at least three children were gone today. I’m wondering if we should keep them home for a few days.”

Brent suppressed a groan. That was another problem that they didn’t need. Inhaling deeply, he tried to tell himself they didn’t need to worry.

They weren’t in danger, not yet. But they would need to be careful.

At last he responded, “That might be wise.”

His wife paused to loop her arm around his waist, gently pressing her warm body against his. The evening was growing cold and it felt good to be close to her. As he looked down into her eyes, he felt the stress begin to melt away.

“It’s all going to work out. We have each other, remember?” Celia reminded him in a low voice. “We’ll work, we’ll buy the hay, we’ll do whatever it takes. We can even... Snow?”

Her sudden change of topic through Brent off. It couldn’t be snowing, after all. It wasn’t even October. The confusion in her voice was clear.



He followed her gaze as she looked behind him out the window.

“Don’t be... oh.”

He dropped his arms from around Celia to stare out the window and make sure he wasn’t dreaming. He even pinched himself but nothing changed.

Shaking his head, he grudgingly watched as thick white flakes made their way downward. It was most definitely snow.

“It’s too early for that,” he mumbled. He couldn’t take his eyes off of it. Was the snowfall growing thicker or was it just him? He swallowed hard. “Celia...”

Her eyes were on the window as well. Grabbing his hand, she gave him a squeeze. “I know. But I meant what I said. We’ll figure it out, I promise you.”

She kept her promises. They spent the night playing games with the children and then retired to bed where the two of them stayed up late to discuss their options.

Only one kept coming back to him: buying hay from the neighbors.

Though Celia suggested they wait until they needed it, that worried Brent. It was best they bought it as early as possible.

However, the snow was still falling the following day.

The children had fun with it at first but eventually grew cold and didn’t want to be outside to do chores. Celia set them all to knitting before telling Brent they should go talk to their neighbors.

"I hate to say it, but I think you're right. This is the best time," he admitted.

But he didn't like it. They had a few inches of snow by this point, clearly turning it into the storm of the century.

He was doing his best to hide his anxiety from both his children and his wife. Especially Celia since she hadn't had a winter like this one before. He worried about scaring her off.

"We're going to have to walk," Brent said when they got outside. "It's too thick for the horses. They wouldn't make it through."

"So we walk?" Celia asked him nervously while fixing the scarf he had given her around her neck. When he nodded, she gave him a short smile. "So be it. Then we walk."

At first, Brent had some hope.

Maybe someone would have a surplus of hay. Even if they didn't, he thought he could buy a little from the surrounding ranches and farms to get enough.

However, neither situation panned out for them. Every home gave them bad news: no one had any hay because of the drought.

"Do we really need the cows?" Celia asked hesitantly after they left the third house.

She held his hand after having fallen down four times. Much of the snow was slick as ice.

"Maybe we could sell them in town for money."

He appreciated her thoughtfulness, but shook his head.

“Everyone else will be trying that as well, at this point. Our only other option would be to slaughter the calves for meat, but we’ll lose money in that endeavor.”

“I see.” Her teeth were chattering loudly as she spoke. “I’m sure we’ll find someone. But can we try again tomorrow? I can’t feel my toes anymore. Or my hands. Or my nose.”

Immediately annoyed, he opened his mouth to tell her that they couldn’t just stop because they felt like it. But then he looked at her and remembered himself.

He had promised himself and her that he would try harder for them. He couldn’t take his frustration out on her. Part of him thought about sending her home so he could keep moving.

But then he looked down at the hand he held and gave her a squeeze.

Celia tried to smile at him and there he could see the snowflakes falling on her face. There were several clinging to her beautiful long eyelashes.

“All right.” Brent swallowed hard, telling himself that it was for the best that they return home now. Maybe they would have better luck later. “Let’s go home, then.”

Celia heaved a sigh of relief and turned them back toward home. She walked closely beside him. “I meant what I said, Brent. We’ll figure it out. It just might take a little while, that’s all.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” he murmured. His eyes scanned the view

before them. Most of it was white at this point.

Sighing, he prayed that she was right. She had to be.

**I**t was late by the time they were able to make it to bed. Celia slipped under the covers, grateful she had thought to bring out another blanket. The night was still growing colder.

She caught sight of the snow outside the window. It had finally stopped, but there was a wind blowing about. A sigh escaped her lips as she settled down into the soft pillow.

Eyes closing, she tugged the blankets up to her chin.

“It’s so cold,” she murmured.

The bed shifted as her husband moved around. He pulled lightly on the blankets before slipping a hand over to her to make sure that she was still covered.

When he wrapped an arm around her and drew her close to him, she opened her eyes and offered a tired smile.

“I always meant to put a fireplace in here,” he murmured. His eyes were half-open, as though to remind them both about how exhausted they were.

A fireplace in there? She had no idea where it would have fit, but the notion was nice and made her feel a little warmer.

Lying close side by side, their foreheads touched. She wondered if her cold nose bothered his cheek. He said nothing of it as he breathed in and out deeply for a quiet moment.

She wondered what was going through his mind; thinking of how stressed he was on their way home made her worry about him.

Celia tried to think of something to say to comfort him.

“If it’s an early storm, maybe it’ll melt quickly,” she suggested hopefully. “The snow will go away and we might have a dry spell for a week or two.

“It happens frequently enough, I believe. Then we’ll have time to do something about the hay before it runs out.”

He opened his eyes and gave her a small smile. “Maybe. But if our neighbors don’t have hay to sell, I doubt anyone else in town does. We would have to travel somewhere else.”

The doubt was clear in his voice.

Clearly, he had never been in this sort of trouble before.

If only she knew what to say to make him feel better, to solve this problem for them. The weight on her chest told her they couldn’t let this sit for much longer. Something had to be done.

But what?

She thought over the past couple of weeks since she had arrived to

join the family.

It hadn't been easy. Every time she thought everything would become peaceful, some sort of hiccup got in the way of that.

Putting a hand on his cheek, she rubbed her thumb against the stubble there. The dark circles under his eyes were growing. It worried her; she didn't like seeing him so stressed like this.

After all he had done to help her grow comfortable in her new home, she wanted to be able to do something in turn for him.

"Then we'll ride as far as we have to," she assured him.

Nodding, Brent let out a long sigh. "Thank you. I'm sorry. I wanted to have a nice winter for you, but I'm afraid I can't control the weather."

Her smile widened. "That's all right. I didn't expect you to."

The two of them chuckled, sharing a look before shifting to get a little more comfortable. Their knees knocked against one another but she didn't mind.

It was simply nice to be right here with her husband.

His smile slowly faded away as something seemed to come to mind. "If we can't find hay... If we fail, we can try to sell the youngest calves off to the other ranchers.

"I was thinking about this earlier. It's doubtful, since they wouldn't be able to feed them, but they might have a better idea of what could be done than I do. We just have to hope we'll get lucky."

“Get lucky,” Celia echoed softly.

The two of them talked for a while longer. But Brent could hardly keep his eyes open and soon they were both beginning to slur their words. She thought it best that they call it a night.

She curled up close against her husband’s chest so she could feel his body relax into sleep.

Part of Celia had hoped that the snow would be melted by the time they woke the following morning. But that wasn’t the case.

The snow stayed for the following days as their family worked on finding a new pattern to live by.

“I miss my friends.” Lily pouted when Celia explained they wouldn’t be going back to school for some time. “I even miss the chalkboard.”

“I’m sorry,” Celia told her with a sympathetic smile.

Penelope and Mary helped Brent out in the barn with easy tasks while she tended to the twins inside. They were rambunctious and always looking for some new game to play.

It was a lot of work to keep the fire going and to keep them entertained at the same time. But she told herself that she was up for a challenge.

However, when they solved one problem, another always seemed to emerge right after it. Just a few days after the snowfall began, with more snow falling daily, the storm worsened.

Brent didn’t want any of them outside as the winds picked up. He



tended to the chores as best as he could before making his way inside.

Looking at him made Celia think of a snowman. She would have smiled if she weren't so worried.

"I'll start supper," she said as she helped him out of his thick layers. "I know it's early, but I think we could use it. We could retire early tonight and that might be good for us all."

"Maybe," he mumbled. Then he sighed, looking down at her with that worried shadow in the back of his gaze.

Offering a sympathetic smile, she patted his cheek. His scarf was removed and then she took his hand to lead him into the front room, where the children were reenacting Shakespeare plays.

At least, the twins were. They had sticks for swords in their hands as they poked one another and laughed.

Before she started to smile, she hesitated and wondered where the other girls had gone. Mary had been quiet lately, almost as quiet as Penelope, but Celia thought she had seen her stepdaughter grow cheerful a few times over the day.

"Why don't you take a seat?" she asked Brent. "You can watch the children play from right here. And then I'll..."

The words escaped her as she looked toward the hall.

There was Penelope, coming from the hall to her room. But judging from the look on the young girl's pale face, Celia immediately knew that something was wrong.

Gripping Brent tightly, she hastened over.

“Penelope? What is it? What happened? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost, dear,” Celia added worriedly. She reached out to touch the girl’s cheek in case she was cold.

But Penelope gave a short shake of her head and grabbed Celia’s hand. She swallowed loudly and then tugged her into the hallway. Since Celia was still holding onto Brent, he came with them.

The oldest daughter paused and glanced over her shoulder before worriedly looking back at them. “It’s Mary. She isn’t feeling well,” she added in a whisper.

Cold dread trickled down Celia’s spine.

She whipped her head over to look at Brent, only to find that his eyes were open wide with the same realization that she’d just had. If Mary wasn’t feeling well enough to join in games with the family, then she was assuredly sick.

But when had this happened? How?

Remembering the mention of the flu from Mr. Mortenson back in town, Celia gave her husband’s hand a squeeze.

A bad flu was going around town. That was what Mary was most likely dealing with.

How had they not known?

“I need to...” Brent let go of her hand to sweep down the hall.

Celia and Penelope watched him go before Celia pulled herself

together to start thinking more carefully. She didn't want to make everyone's situation worse than it might already be.

Turning back to the young girl by her side, she gave Penelope's hand a squeeze. "We'll go see to her. Thank you for letting us know, dear.

"Go on back to the kitchen and get the twins in there. We don't want to spread any sickness. I'll be right back."

Once Penelope nodded, she hurried off down the hall.

The door to Penelope and Mary's room was open, and she stepped through to find Brent hovering over Mary.

A groan came from the bed before Celia saw the girl buried under at least four blankets. From what she could see, Penelope had put her own blankets over her sister.

"How is she?" Celia asked.

Brent just shook his head. His eyes were wide and his lips were in a thin line. As he fixed the blankets around the young girl, his hands seemed to shake.

Reaching forward, Celia checked for herself as Mary let out a low groan.

Her forehead was hot to the touch. The girl's eyelids fluttered open for a second before she shivered and curled up into a tight ball.

"Mary?" Celia asked anxiously. "Mary, can you hear us?"

"I don't feel good. I can't breathe," she added before starting to

kick the blankets off her. The ragged breath that escaped her lips sounded horrible.

Just as Mary pushed the blankets back, she started to shiver more violently.

Brent shook his head in disbelief. He hurriedly covered his daughter back up while he asked, "I don't understand. She was fine this morning. How did it happen so suddenly?"

A small voice piped up from the hall. "She didn't feel good yesterday but she didn't say anything. Mary didn't want to worry anyone," Penelope added when Celia looked back at her.

Looking at her husband, Celia felt the weight of their girl's words hit her hard.

The children must have all seen how stressed they were about what was going on. Of course Mary wouldn't want to get in the way of that.

Guilt clung to her as she reached forward again to touch the girl's cheek. Celia grimaced and shook her head. This was not good at all.

"We have to do something," she told Brent.

Small illnesses went their own way, but this was not one of those.

Celia bit her lip and worried as she mentally sorted through everything in the house that could potentially help Mary to feel better.

Brent swallowed loudly. "We have to get her to a doctor. Now," he

added.

The two of them glanced out through the window. Flurries soared through the sky; she couldn't quite tell if it was because it was snowing or merely wind blowing it around.

Neither answer was what she was looking for, however. How would they get to a doctor through this?

“Ready the horses and I’ll dress her warmly,” Celia offered to him with a short nod. This wasn’t the best plan, but it was better than doing nothing.

Mary looked terribly unwell. It killed her inside to know that the young girl had been hiding this pain until she couldn’t bear it any longer.

They had to help her.

While Brent hurried from the room, Celia moved quickly. She put on the young girl’s boots and then added two jackets, with a shawl and a hat and mittens and two scarves.

Then, once she had wrapped Mary up in a blanket, she hefted up the child to make her way out the door.

“Stay here and stay safe,” she instructed Penelope. “Keep the fire going. You should all eat something, all right? And stay together; we’ll hopefully be back soon.”

Then she made it out the back door and stopped.

Brent was right there standing on the stairs. It didn’t look like he had gone out there to the barn yet.

She took a step toward him while fixing her grip on Mary, but then paused as she realized that Brent was standing there stiff with wide eyes.

He looked terrified.

“Brent?”

“The horses won’t make it in this weather. Look. It’s turned icy, Celia. We would only risk getting hurt out here, or worse,” he said haltingly.

“I don’t... we have to help her. But I don't know how.”

It was much too easy hearing the fear in his voice. Celia inhaled sharply as she looked around to see what he was talking about.

The ground glimmered in the right light. Too pretty and too dangerous, she supposed.

But if Brent was willing to say that they were in trouble, then she knew they had to be in a desperate situation. Fear filled her heart.

Holding Mary close, she began to pray for a miracle.

“We don’t have a choice,” Celia reminded Brent.

He knew this. He knew they didn’t have any option in this just as much as he knew they didn’t have any way to get those horses into town to see the doctor.

Everyone was smart and sane enough to know that this was not the weather to go out and visit with one another.

But this was an emergency.

Nodding at Celia, Brent tried to think.

Yet there was so much trying to distract him. He could hear the loud beating of his heart. The falling snow seemed to wave at them, teasing him to say that there was nothing he could do out here.

Beside him stood Celia with Mary; his daughter’s labored breathing made him feel like a weak old man incapable of doing anything.

He shifted the hat on his head and tried to think of what he could do. They had to find some way to travel into town. He used to

have a pair of snowshoes, but they had broken some time ago.

Was the snow growing thicker or was it just him?

Celia inhaled before speaking up. “A sled. What about a sled? A wagon would be too big. We can try to do that and then walk.

“My boots are new and good; yours are fine, right? It’ll take longer, but...”

He nodded. “But we don’t have a choice,” he finished her statement and echoed her earlier words.

More than anything, Brent was grateful to have her by his side. He didn’t know how he would have handled this situation on his own.

Moving quickly, he took Mary up in his arms from Celia’s to lead the way down to the barn.

It was a slow process. Every step had to be deliberate. Celia slipped once but he couldn’t help her out. She told him that she was fine, but his concern only grew.

Brent prayed to the Lord then, knowing that they would need a miracle to make it to a doctor. They could hardly see the barn in the distance.

Was the snowfall moving faster? None of this boded well for them.

His heart pounded as they finally reached the barn. Celia struggled to open the door for them. Holding Mary tightly, Brent slipped inside and set her down on the nearby working table.

His daughter shivered and peeked an eye open. “Where are we?”



she whispered hoarsely.

“It’s all right. We’re going to get you help, all right? You’re going to be okay,” he promised.

His family had lost enough. There was no way he could lose his daughter now.

It pained his heart to see her suffering like this, to have her spirit beaten into submission with the hacking coughs and shivers.

“The sled,” Celia reminded him.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Brent nodded. He squeezed her shoulder before hurrying off to go find the sled, which was behind most of the hay bales in the loft.

He cursed under his breath in annoyance as he then had to waste several minutes digging out the sled. But eventually it was in his arms and he was able to take it down to the girls.

“Rope. We need rope,” Celia mumbled as he picked Mary up.

His wife hurried around to collect three long cords of rope. She also gathered three more blankets. They were the thick, scratchy ones that the horses used, but they would have to do.

The blankets were set over Mary and then they securely tied her down.

“One more moment,” his wife added before he could direct the sled toward the exit. He watched as Celia hurried around to collect two lanterns, a bundle of matches, and Mary’s lasso.

He frowned. "What's that for?"

She hastened over to his side to tie everything to the sled. A grim smile graced her lips before she gave him her answer.

"She loves her lasso. I think perhaps she might want it for comfort or strength in her recovery."

"You think of everything," Brent murmured.

Straightening up, she gave him a small shrug and then sighed. The two of them shared a tender look.

They were dealing with a terribly serious situation, something neither of them had ever faced before. It worried him that they hardly knew if this plan would work.

All he knew was that he had to try to help his daughter.

"I think of many things but I haven't found a way to shut out the fear," Celia said at last. A shaky breath escaped her lips.

Glancing out toward the storm outside, she shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. "I thought I was too old to get scared."

"You're not. And neither am I," he admitted. Stepping over to her, he gently rested his gloved hand over her cheek. She sniffled. "I'm scared, too. But I feel a lot better knowing you're here."

Celia gulped. "I am here. I'm always here."

"Good. We can do this." Stepping back, Brent inhaled deeply and then let it out in the hopes of pulling himself together.

He rubbed his hands together before glancing at the door and then his daughter. "You should go inside before the storm gets worse."

Her eyes widened. "What are you talking about? I'm coming with you."

"What? No. It's too dangerous," Brent told her. "You should stay behind. The children..."

Celia shook her head. "I already talked to Penelope. She'll watch over the twins and keep them safe. She's a responsible girl, after all. I'm going with you."

"Mary is my daughter and I'm not going to let you do this without me. She is what matters right now; we need to get her help. I won't just sit around."

Though he opened his mouth to protest, there weren't any words willing to spill from his lips. What could he say to that?

He replayed his wife's strong and sensitive words in his mind, finding his heart warming with the knowledge of how much she cared for his family.

For *their* family.

Brent knew at that moment there was nothing he could say that would convince Celia to change her mind. She loved his children and would do what it took to keep them safe.

They both knew how responsible Penelope was, so they didn't have to worry too much about the rest of them in the house. Inside, they had everything they needed.

The only thing their family really had more of a need for was a doctor. So Brent nodded to Celia and tugged the sled out of the barn.

There was a small bar where Celia hung the extra lantern while she carried the other one. A thick rope was looped through the bar so that he could pull the sled behind him.

It was heavy now, but he expected it would be easier once they were moving on the ice. He paused to wait for Celia to follow after him.

Once she had closed the doors of the barn behind them, they started out into the storm.

Never before had he faced something so fierce. He tugged his scarf up to keep his face from getting soaked. Every step forced him to balance himself and then pause to look around.

“This way?” Celia asked beside him. She still had to shout while pointing to their left.

The main road. All he could see were shadows, but Brent knew his home well. He nodded and then led the way while tugging Mary behind them.

While Celia tried to keep her arms up to hold the lantern, she had to take frequent breaks and he wasn't sure how much this was really helping.

Snow stung in his eyes. It grew difficult to tell if it had caused him to tear up or if it was just all the moisture on his face now.

His grip was tight on the rope even as his fingers grew numb.

Soon, he couldn't feel his feet anymore, either. Seeing his wife move ahead of him, Brent began to worry for her, as well.

She had had her own winters, but surely nothing so harsh as this. He kept waiting to hear a complaint, but she never said a word.

Just taking a single step felt like he had walked a mile.

Brent groaned, wincing in the biting cold. Every part of his body protested and begged him to turn around to be somewhere safe and warm.

Not yet, he told himself.

Soon, they were on the main road. Ranches on the right side and the river on the left. He couldn't see either of them as he squinted in the cold.

That would hopefully be the best route for them, a clear path that would lead them in the right direction. The flat ground was slippery, but surely it wouldn't be too big of a problem.

Inhaling, Brent slowed down to take a peek at his wife to see how she was faring.

Celia kept her head down and her arm out with the lantern, taking step after step without faltering.

A lump formed in his throat as an overwhelming feeling of appreciation for her swept over him. Just watching her move gave him the strength he needed to keep moving.

How did he become so lucky to have her in his life?

Brent could hardly believe they had been able to find one another in those mail-order bride ads. It was almost too good to be true.

She loved his family and cared for them. This helped him find comfort in knowing that they weren't alone.

Swallowing hard, Brent focused his gaze back on the path when he suddenly wondered if he would ever lose her like he had lost Nicole.

Celia had already promised that she was there to stay. But promises weren't always enough.

After what he went through with Nicole, the very thought of losing anyone sent Brent's heart beating erratically. He couldn't lose Celia and he certainly couldn't lose Mary.

She was his little spitfire, his cowgirl. Besides, she was just beginning to warm up to Celia, and he knew great things could happen in their future.

This gave Brent the push he needed to keep moving.

Coming up beside him, Celia nudged him with her elbow. "How close do you think we are?" she asked loudly.

He grimaced. He didn't know and he feared the worst. Hoping he wasn't too far off from the truth, he said, "I'm sure we're about halfway there. Maybe closer.

"We have to make it around this bend and then the buildings will be there. Well, through the snowstorm, I suppose."

The two of them carried on.

They reached the bend and almost immediately a sharp wind swept through them. It tugged at their clothes and tried to knock them off balance.

Wavering, Brent attempted to brace himself against the bad weather.

A strong gust nearly blew them over. He crouched to balance himself better. Just as it seemed to work, however, he felt the rope in his hands give a tug.

“Mary,” he breathed.

Whirling around, Brent struggled to keep hold of the sled as another strong gust of wind blew past. His face stung from all the snowflakes hitting him.

He squinted, trying to fix his grasp on the rope to keep Mary safe.

But the ice was slippery and so were his hands. Desperate, Brent tightened his grip on the rope after bracing himself. That should have tugged the sled closer to him.

Instead, the rope snapped.

It was a loud crack that made Brent freeze in disbelief. There was no time for him to move or even breathe as the wind pushed the sled holding his daughter down the incline.

Horror ripped through him when he glimpsed the river below.

His breath caught in despair.

Just days ago, that river had been flowing with water. Now, it was

covered in ice—but how thick was that ice?

Feeling his throat turn dry, Brent immediately recognized the seriousness of their predicament. On top of that, he knew how bad their luck was right then.

“No!” Celia shouted beside him and then lunged for Mary.

He grabbed her with his arms around her waist. “Wait!” he cried out. The words were bitter on his tongue. “Stop, Celia! The ice might not hold you both.”

His wife squirmed in his arms. “But Mary! We have to get her!”

Turning his gaze over to his daughter strapped to the sled, Brent struggled to keep the emotions at bay. The fear within him only grew and he was sick to his stomach.

Mary was lying yards away now, in the middle of the river.

What could she do? Even if she was feeling well enough to move, she was strapped down firmly.

“We will get her. We just have to be careful,” Brent said. They would have to take their time, he knew, to find a way to get Mary to safety.

He opened his mouth to speak again but stopped as he heard another sound.

A loud *crack* ripped through his soul.

The ice was shifting, he realized immediately. The blood drained from his face.



Clutching Celia in his arms, with her standing there frozen as well, the two of them stared in dismay. Fear kept them still.

They had to do something, Brent knew. And they would have to do it quickly.

**T**he fear held Celia immobile as she stared in dismay at the distance between her and Mary.

It was a couple of yards, something that could typically be crossed with a few sprints in that direction. She could have done it in moments, and would have tried if her husband hadn't wrapped his arms around her to stop her.

She could feel desperation within her. When she glanced up at Brent, she could see it in his eyes as well.

He looked around everywhere as though for a miracle. That would have been very helpful for them to bring Mary back to safety.

Another crack.

A shudder ran through Celia. She wanted to move so badly and do something; she had been ready to race out to save the young girl.

Though she supposed she knew she should be grateful to Brent for stopping her, she couldn't help but wonder what they were supposed to do now.

She flinched as another crack was heard. It was quiet, but slow and creaking. The situation was made worse by the fact that she couldn't actually see where this was happening.

Though the snowfall wasn't heavy enough to create a blizzard, the winds were fast and sharp. Wearing her thickest scarf around her chin was not enough to keep her warm.

It had been tucked up over her nose before, but it kept slipping down. Eventually, she had given up caring and accepted that she might never feel her face again.

Inhaling, Celia caught herself before she could let the panic swallow her whole. She righted herself and tried to calm down. Being frantic wouldn't help anyone. So what could they do?

"Celia," Brent choked out hoarsely. "I don't know what to do. If I have to go out there..."

She hurriedly shook her head and said, "No! No, we're going to figure this out. The three of us are going to get through this. I'm going to solve this. She is going to be safe."

Her throat ached from shouting over the winds, but she couldn't think about water at a time like this.

As Celia tried to think about what they could do, her fingers inched over her jacket to pull it tighter. No matter what she did, she couldn't stop shivering.

The cold had completely enveloped her, inside and out. Her coat was warm, but not for a journey like this. And the rope she had tied around her waist didn't exactly offer any warmth.

A gasp escaped her lips as she realized a possibility before them.

Turning to Brent, she grabbed his elbow. His eyes were wide to show that his fear was only growing. They had to act fast to save Mary without getting themselves injured in the process.

“Brent! We can do it,” she told him. Sniffing, she hurriedly pulled the rope off her hip.

It was meant to have been attached to the sled, but they hadn’t wasted the time on that. Her fingers were numb so it took her a minute.

“The lasso?” he asked her in confusion and hesitated. “What would we do with that? I’ve never been very good with it. Celia, I can’t —”

She cut him off with a shake of her head. “But I can!”

Nothing more was said. There wasn’t time for them to argue or debate this situation. They hardly had time for action.

Her heart hammered as she fumbled with the rope to loop it like Mary had shown her not too long ago. She could hear the young girl’s stern instructions in her mind as she tried to get the knot just right.

“Celia?”

Groaning, she grabbed the tip of her glove with her teeth and pulled it off.

Immediately she felt the strong chill seeping in, but she couldn’t put the glove back on yet; it was too slippery with the rope and

there wasn't time to practice.

Another crack sounded loudly through the air. And this time, she could see it.

Once the idea came to mind, Celia had hoped that the fear would lessen. Instead, it grew.

She took a shaky breath before stepping forward slightly. Every move she made would have to count because they were nearly out of time.

Her eyes fell on Mary. The young girl was bundled up so firmly that she had yet to move on the sled.

Celia wasn't even certain she was awake or conscious enough to know what was going on in that moment. Hopefully, that was a good thing.

With one short prayer to the Lord, Celia flung out the lasso just like Mary had taught her.

The rope flew through the air quickly. It had to or else the wind would steal it away in one direction or the other. It went straight toward Mary and the sled.

And, much to Celila's relief and amazement, she glimpsed the loop of the lasso wrap around the metal bar of the sled.

Her heart stopped.

"Brent!" she cried out. "Help me!"

Neither of them had to say anything about what had to happen

next. Her husband was right there by her side, at her elbow to yank on the rope.

It wasn't heavy, but speed was an important factor.

A loud crack and splash sounded nearby and she stopped breathing. She could see moving water nearby. Her eyes burned and her hands were freezing.

All she wanted to do was stop, but she couldn't. Not yet. The seconds were ticking by much too slowly; it felt as though Mary would never be safe.

Memories of the past came back to Celia as she considered all the children that she had never been able to give birth to. The pain and heartache had been nearly unbearable.

So many tears had been shed knowing that she had lost something so precious.

This won't happen again, Celia told herself.

Sweat trickled down her brow as she worked with Brent. She could hear him breathing hard in her ear, the panic still growing strong between them.

Her eyes widened when she saw the ice beneath the sled begin to waver.

But one last yank and then she watched as the sled crossed from the ice onto the snow.

Warm relief poured through Celia.

Gasping, she managed to take a few wobbling steps toward Mary. Her knees were weak as the adrenaline began to fade away. Just before she reached the sled, Celia collapsed on the ground.

The snow caught her, keeping her from falling too hard. She reached out to find Mary's arm and clung to the girl in relief. Tears filled her eyes, growing cold as they crawled down her cheeks.

Brent leaned down to be there with her. He rested one hand on his daughter's shoulder and then another on Celia.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment as they recovered from what had just happened. They didn't have time to waste, so she took a few more deep breaths before giving him a nod.

"You're ready?" he asked.

She managed a grim smile before putting out her hand to him. "We're not out of danger yet."

Nodding, her husband helped her up to her feet. They held tightly to one another before turning to the sled.

Mary had her eyes closed and was breathing lightly. It seemed that she hadn't woken up and fortunately, had no idea how much danger she had been in just moments ago.

"All right." Brent took a deep breath and spoke hoarsely. "Let's go. We're almost there."

He was right. Fumbling to put her glove back on, Celia straightened up and then helped Brent correct the sled and shifted back onto the road.

They all had to be freezing by this point. She certainly was, after all.

Back on the road, Celia walked close alongside Brent. She didn't want to let either of them out of her reach.

It felt as though they would never get anywhere. Unable to remember where the doctor's house was, she relied on Brent to lead the way.

Celia looked over her shoulder frequently to make sure that Mary was still bundled up and safe, praying constantly that this would end well. She needed her family to be safe.

"Here it is," Brent announced.

Seeing where he was pointing, Celia could have burst into tears all over again. She swallowed hard and nodded. She took to the steps of the house while Brent collected Mary in his arms.

"What?" Doctor Pulcer fixed his glasses and peered out at her in alarm. "It's late. What on earth? There is a storm raging, my good woman. What are you doing here?"

"It is an emergency. I'm Celia. I married Brent Calloway," Celia added hurriedly.

Then she glanced back and made room as her husband started over to them. "Please. Mary is terribly ill. We didn't know what else to do. We came all this way."

"Ah. Oh! Well, I, just come in, please," the doctor stammered in surprise. He backed up to make room for them to enter. It didn't take him long to realize how desperate they were.



Once inside, Brent quickly explained all that had happened and all that they knew about Mary's illness. She was set on the same cot that Liam had laid on just a short while ago.

It put a lump in Celia's throat as she helped the doctor and his wife start a fire to heat up water. Medicine was pulled out and the work began.

It wasn't long before there was nothing for Celia to do. She took a chair beside Brent against the wall and slumped.

He suggested that she try to get some rest, but she couldn't think of that at a time like this. Nor could he.

Hours passed as she fidgeted in her seat. She prayed and she held hands with her husband, waiting and worrying.

The inability to do anything was a horrible feeling, one that Celia didn't ever want to experience again. She was grateful to the doctor and wondered if there was anything more that she could be doing to help with Mary's recovery.

But everyone assured her that she had done all that she could when she asked.

She eventually dozed off for a short while.

With her cheek pressed into Brent's shoulder, Celia was aware of every move he made. It wasn't long before he jerked and nudged her to open up her eyes.

"Mary's waking," he murmured.

Gulping, Celia went with him to Mary's side. The doctor had gone

off to take a short break once he had been able to break her fever a short while back.

Still buried under blankets, the young girl wiggled slightly. After a yawn, she opened her eyes.

“Papa? Celia? Where am I?” she asked.

A tear made its way down Celia’s cheek. She swallowed hard before letting out a shaky breath.

Brent leaned forward to push the damp hair from his daughter’s forehead.

“Mary, you’re awake. We’re at the doctor’s. You were terribly sick with a fever, so we brought you here last night. How are you feeling?”

“Terrible, but better than when I went to bed,” she said decidedly before frowning. “I don’t remember coming here, though.”

Seeing her husband waver, Celia grabbed their chairs so they could sit with Mary. Meanwhile, Brent began to explain all that they had been through.

There were tears in his eyes as well while he talked. He went through everything that had happened since they had first found her in bed.

“Whoa,” Mary breathed in awe when he explained what had happened to her out on the ice. She looked over to Celia with big eyes. “You used the lasso! I wish I could have seen it.”

Celia shook her head. “I’m just glad that you’re safe here with us.”

The girl looked at her for a moment before reaching a hand out to her. Confused, Celia accepted it, only to be pulled to her feet.

Mary moved to wrap her arms around Celia. It was the first time the two of them had hugged. Stunned, Celia hardly knew how to react.

“Me too,” Mary murmured in her ear. “I’m glad you’re here.”

## Epilogue

**B**rent sighed, flipping over in his bed to reach out to his wife.

But she wasn't there.

He peeked an eye open to find that the bed was empty and sunlight was streaming into the room. Confused, he sat up and looked around him.

What time was it? He could have sworn it was still early, before dawn.

Kicking off the blankets, he started to stretch while wondering why he was still in bed. He was usually good about getting up early alongside his wife.

However, Celia was gone and her side of the room appeared tidy like it always was.

A moment later, he could smell the bacon.

Immediately, Brent was on his feet. His stomach grumbled as he hastily made the bed and then clothed himself.

It was clear that he had slept in while life went on without him. He didn't like missing out, so he brushed a hand through his hair with a promise to shave later as he headed out the door.

Though the day was early, he could tell it would be a warm one.

July was always the hottest month. The sun was bright and he knew he would spend every minute outdoors sweating.

It had been a brilliant idea of Celia's to get him a larger canteen so he could hydrate more frequently while he worked.

Though Brent was glad summer had arrived, he still wasn't sure how that had happened. Where was the time going? Every day it moved faster and faster.

The days were cheerful so he supposed that he couldn't be mad. He just hoped they would always have enough time to do everything they wanted. Every minute with his family was a good one.

The smell of bacon grew stronger as he finally reached the kitchen.

He sniffed and then smiled as the twins shrieked, "He's here! Papa's here!"

Laughing, Celia looked up from where she sat with a fork in hand. She raised an eyebrow at him with a merry smile.

"I was about to let them come jump on the bed to wake you. Good morning, dear."

"What are you talking about?" he protested. "I wasn't that tired."

She tutted playfully as he started over to her. "I tried to wake you

twice and you just mumbled both times. But I'm glad that the bacon did the trick.

"Well done, Mary—you were right that this would get him up."

It was Mary who started snickering and the others followed.

Listening to the children giggle, Brent reached his wife and leaned down to give her a kiss on the cheek. It had been nearly a year since her arrival.

Every day, he felt that he grew more fond of her company and loved her more.

Celia touched his arm before he could move away. Seeing her inviting smile, he leaned back down to kiss her on the lips.

The children were still laughing and squealing. It was going to be a good day, he could tell, with everyone so happy and wild.

"You didn't want to shave?" she murmured.

"Not important enough with you lot out here. What, you don't like it?" He teased her.

She smiled even wider at him when he began to pull away. "I like everything about you, Brent."

He squeezed her shoulder and then went to take his own seat on the other side of the table. They had decided to sit at opposite sides in case it worked better to keep the children under control.

However, little could be done when everyone grew energetic, so that just meant he had to be away from Celia.

Making a mental note to rearrange the settings next time, Brent looked down at the full plate before him. Someone had already put it together in the perfect portions so he had plenty of eggs and bacon with just a little bit of potato.

His family knew him well.

Warmth flooded through Brent's chest as he paused to look around the kitchen. It was semi-clean and filled with many familiar objects. This was his home.

"Stick out your tongue!"

"No, you stick out your tongue!"

"That's funny! Do it again!"

There was his family before him, playing around to enjoy this brand new day. Mary was making silly faces at the twins while Penelope tried not to laugh, but they all knew she made the best of the silly faces in the family.

It wouldn't take long before the twins wore her down. And once she had done that, all four children would start begging Celia and himself.

He could hardly wait.

Picking up his utensils, Brent took a bite of the tender bacon. It was filled with such flavor that he had to suppress a satisfied groan.

They might have had bacon a week ago, but this felt like he was tasting it for the first time. He quickly took another bite though he

tried not to rush himself.

Torn between savoring every bit and shoving it all in his mouth, he didn't know quite what to do with himself.

“Papa!”

He glanced over at Mary, who had just stood up in her seat.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Celia open her mouth to handle the situation. But she didn't get a chance when the young girl shrieked and pointed toward the window.

“The sheep are out of the pen,” she announced.

Frowning, he stopped chewing for a second and went to the window to see what she was talking about.

To his disappointment, she was right.

The lock for the pen had been rusting and one decent nudge could open it. He had just kept forgetting to get a new lock. But now it seemed there was no more time to wait.

“Come on,” he mumbled.

He took three steps toward the door before realizing he was still holding his knife and fork. He frowned and then hurriedly returned to put them down.

As he did, the children spoke up, arguing about who would get to go help him.

“But it's my turn. You helped last week with the pigs and the slop.”



“Yeah, but this week is my chore for the sheep. That means I get to do it!”

“Wait, I want to!”

There was no time for Brent to wait around. He hurriedly glanced around to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything. Celia waved him off and then he started toward the door.

“Just hold on,” he said over his shoulder. “I just have to—”

“I'm coming!” they all shouted.

He heard Celia laugh as feet trampled through the kitchen. “Everyone? Then wait for me!”

Confused, Brent opened the door and paused as all four children scrambled past him toward the sheep. Amusement flooded through him.

Before he could move, a hand wrapped around his wrist.

Celia gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and proceeded to tug him along off the porch and after the sheep. His heart skipped a beat as he followed after her.

She smiled widely at him before hurrying to catch one of the sheep by the ranch.

On his own, Brent raced after another sheep. The day was hot and sweat trickled down his back.

He could hear everyone shouting behind him as they laughed and tried to tell the sheep to obey.

Though he attempted to be annoyed, he couldn't do it. There wasn't an irritated bone in his body even as he chased after the herd in the heat.

He collected his sheep and fixed the gate while the other sheep were brought forward. Everyone was laughing, teasing one another as they helped bring in one creature after the next.

Maybe it was a mess, but they were happy and cheerful. What more could he want?

## Extended Epilogue

**S**quinting in the sunlight, Celia glanced up at the world around her.

It hardly made sense how this could be so beautiful. The smile wouldn't come off her face no matter how much her cheeks ached from being so happy. She felt relaxed and joyful in the moment.

She couldn't imagine feeling anything else on such a perfect day.

Looking around at the sparkling pond she had stepped in, Celia paused to chuckle at the tickling feeling of spray from the waterfall nearby.

It was cool and sent a delightful shiver down her spine with every step she took. Wearing her thinnest dress, she watched as the fabric slowly began to submerge.

Just as Celia was enjoying the moment, a wave splashed over her. Coolness swept over her along with the shock. Her mouth dropped open as she froze and looked around.

"Mary!" she cried out. "You liar! You said you wouldn't splash me again."

But she was smiling before she finished talking. As for Mary, the birthday girl was scrambling away from her, shrieking and laughing. “It’s my birthday! Papa said I could do it!”

“What?” Celia pretended to be outraged as she hurriedly went deeper to her thighs. Following Mary, she soon had reached everyone else together.

There was Brent on the other side of the waterfall, where he was teaching the twins how to swim underwater. He shot her a silly grin when she raised her eyebrow at him.

“It is her birthday,” he insisted.

She rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress her smile. However, she was going to take any opportunity afforded her.

When she glimpsed Mary creeping up toward her by the edge of the waterfall, Celia swiftly turned and splashed with both hands.

The young girl was already drenched to the bone, only getting even wetter. She dramatically fell back into the water before reemerging with a loud laugh.

Wading over to her, Mary offered a cheeky grin. “I bet I can beat you over to the big rock!”

Celia shook her head. “There is no chance of that happening.”

Without another second to waste, the two of them started off to the large boulder where the deepest water was. Mary was a strong swimmer, but Celia had been improving since the entire family had started teaching her a few years ago.

The cool water felt glorious across her skin. Trying to keep her hair dry, Celia did her best to move along with Mary.

What a perfect day for the family, she thought. The young girl was turning ten years old and they were doing well enough on the ranch that they could spend the entire day doing something fun.

Two ranch hands had been hired, which truly helped them. They seemed to grow busier every year.

It always worried Celia at first, until Brent reminded her that they had seen miracles before and they would see them again. He was right, of course.

After being a part of this family for a couple of years, Celia would never again doubt in miracles or hope.

She laughed and played with Mary as well as the twins.

Lily and Liam were still so easily distracted with everything going on. They needed the extra help with school on occasion, but it always worked out just fine.

Celia didn't know how that happened, but it did.

Being out here in California with the Calloway family—with her family—brought Celia a peace that she hadn't known was possible.

There were moments where she tried to remember what it used to be like with Richard.

They surely must have been happy for those several years they were married.

The two of them hadn't fought often and had worked to have a good life together. If she'd been able to have children of her own, she supposed they would have still been a family.

Just like Brent would still be with Nicole if she hadn't died in that tragic accident.

It was strange to Celia how much could change in a person's life. She would have never expected this life when she first married Richard.

When he'd given her those divorce papers, she'd wondered if she would ever be happy again.

This was something that she talked about with Brent quite often. Life was moving so quickly that they never seemed to have enough time to marvel over all the changes and their growth.

Between the two of them and their children, Celia felt as though she was always amazed by something.

"I won! I won!" Mary cheered.

Brent let out a whistle while the twins cheered.

"My turn!" Lily cried out.

"And me!" Liam added.

Celia nudged Mary with a smile before turning back to watch the twins swim out to join them. They had taken their time coming over to the deeper water.

It wasn't that bad since she could touch the ground with her toes,

but it was still a distance for them.

While Celia didn't regret the years she had spent with Richard, she could reflect now and see how it was important for her to have moved on.

This was the family she was meant to be a part of.

The children and Brent meant everything to her. Most nights were spent thanking Nicole for letting her become part of the family and promising to watch out for everyone.

Shrieking as the twins splashed over, Celia grabbed Liam in a quick hug before moving out of his way so he could climb onto the rock.

He was always climbing up it and jumping in. Sure enough, he started out of the water.

"Are you going to climb up this time?" Mary turned to her with a mischievous smile.

"Of course not," Celia responded. She shook her head and wrinkled her nose. "And if you wanted to be more careful, then you wouldn't do it, either."

The girl laughed. "Then it's a good thing I don't want to be careful."

Quickly following after her siblings, Mary started up onto the rock on her hands and knees.

The three of the kids playfully argued about who could go first and how they would jump, casually reminding one another to be careful.

Celia took the chance to slowly wade away from them. Leaning back, she swam slowly with her eyes closed. The sun was so bright and felt wonderful on her face.

She moved until she bumped into something.

Opening her eyes, she saw Brent looking down at her with a smile on his face. Water droplets fell from his hair to splash down around her.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said before slipping an arm around her.

She righted herself up on her feet before leaning in so he could give her a kiss. To her disappointment, he started with his lips on her forehead.

But then he kissed her again on the cheek and then the nose. After a playful hesitation, he pressed his lips against hers for a proper kiss.

The waiting was always worth it. Whether it was about his kisses or her relationship with the children, Celia had learned to be patient and wait for everything to come her way.

It had been so hard in the beginning when she had just wanted the children to accept her.

Yet she remembered those days fondly because of all they had been through that ended up bringing them together. Though it had rarely been easy, it had assuredly been worth it.

She thought often of her younger self, when she had been so lonely and distraught at the notion of never having the family she had always desired.



So many tears had been shed and there had been such pain. It had been difficult, making her wish she could have had an idea about how happy she would end up being now.

This was truly her family.

They felt like her best friends. Celia loved being around them every day.

There was so much to learn and do. The children spent time at school and when they returned, they had both work and adventures to get through before sundown.

“Mama? Mama Cee!”

She whirled around to find Penelope standing at the edge of the water.

Still wearing her hat, but now with her shoes off, the young woman waved to her with a broad grin. In her other hand and pressed close to her chest was a book that had just been sent to them in a package from Celia’s parents.

With a hand to shade the sun from her face, Celia squinted and looked at the eldest of her girls. “Yes? Is everything all right?”

Her gaze left Penelope to look at the blankets and baskets nearby in concern.

“You have to listen to this,” Penelope called to her. “There is a poem in this book about a waterfall. It’s beautiful!”

Relaxing against Brent in relief, Celia nodded. “How perfect. Share it, why don’t you?”

She sighed contentedly as her husband fixed his arms around her. They could hear water splashing and laughter behind them while they watched Penelope.

She was growing into a beautiful young woman. Eager for knowledge, she had gathered the courage—though Celia and Brent firmly believed Mary had a hand in this—to ask them to send her off for more schooling.

She would leave next spring to go live with Celia's parents in Boston.

Already, this made Celia sad.

Still, she kept the smile on her face as Penelope recited the beautiful poem. The young girl had such a beautiful voice.

All of the children were growing up so quickly and so well. It was a game between her and Brent when they overly complimented one another or being such good influences on the lot of them.

Just as Penelope finished her poem, a baby cried.

Celia straightened up. She turned to look at Brent worriedly, still not used to such a sad sound. He gave her a squeeze and then nodded.

"She's fine. Go on and see for yourself."

Inhaling, Celia waded out of the water in a hurry. Penelope was still there with her book in her hands.

"That was beautiful," Celia assured her. "It was a brilliant poem and it sounded like you spoke from your soul. If you want to get in

the water today, however, I suggest you get in soon.”

“That’s all right,” Penelope said with a wrinkled nose. “I’d rather read.”

Celia nodded and then hurried off as she heard the cry again. She was just reaching the second basket when the blanket over it fell down. Drawing close, she saw the pout on little Hope’s face.

“Come here, sweetling,” Celia crooned. “Did you sleep well?”

Though she was soaking wet, she supposed the child wouldn’t care when she picked up the two-year-old. The tiny redhead grabbed at her shoulders and sniffled as though glad not to be alone anymore.

Celia knew the feeling.

She rubbed her hand against the baby girl’s shoulder for a moment to make sure Hope wasn’t about to start crying again. It was such a sad sound.

The baby had been in their family for nearly a year now, but Celia still couldn’t get used to the crying. It broke her heart every time.

Though Hope wasn’t blood-related to anyone, she was certainly theirs. The girl’s parents, Hyrum and Jane Hemmet, had passed away in an accident just outside of town in a wagon train.

There had been no family and no one could manage to keep journeying and watch after her. The leader of the group had come to church the next day, begging for someone to adopt Hope.

Celia remembered walking to the front of the church before she knew what she was doing. No one could stop her. And, to her

relief, no one had tried.

The baby had immediately been welcomed into their family. She had adoring sisters and a brother who loved to make her laugh and was always trying to teach her silly words.

“Aw, there you are,” Celia teased Hope as the baby girl gave her a smile.

“Cee-cee,” the baby called her. “No nap.”

Celia chuckled. “No more nap. You’re all done and now you can play with everyone. See? They’re all swimming.”

Turning to face Hope to the family, she watched as everyone turned to wave to the little girl, who started giggling madly. A breeze floated by them.

Looking around, Celia marveled over this beautiful family she belonged to.

While none of the children were biologically hers, it didn’t matter. She really was the mother she had always wanted to become. Happiness had found its place in her life.

Never before had Celia felt so whole and so cheerful. She bounced Hope on their way to the water’s edge, where Brent met them to take the toddler.

Just then, Mary splashed loudly and quickly from the water.

“I forgot about our race! Celia, you promised. Are you ready?”

They did this at least twice a week, usually at Mary’s whim. Celiaa

straightened up in surprise. “What? Now?”

“Of course, now!”

When she turned to Brent, he winked at her. “You’d better hurry. And don’t worry. We’ll all be right here when you come back.”

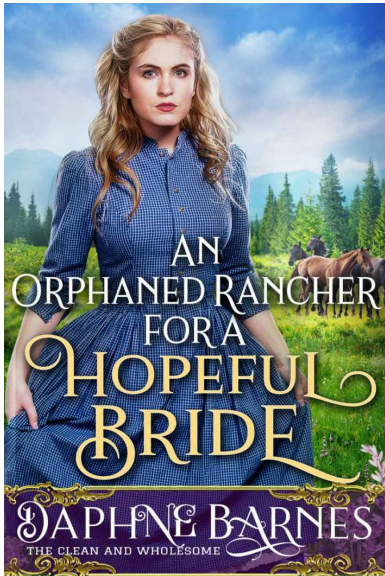
Though Celia’s cheeks were beginning to hurt from smiling so much, she couldn’t stop. She bent over to give him a quick kiss.

He tasted like the fresh strawberries they had all eaten on their picnic just a short while ago.

Then she turned and ran after Mary to where they had tied the horses. Her heart hammered in her chest and she felt a thrill of exhilaration rush through her soul.

This life, Celia knew, couldn’t get any better than it was at this moment.

## An Orphaned Rancher For A Hopeful Bride



## Chapter 1

O  
*ctober*

Naomi Danley carried the buckets of milk to the house. There were only two chickens and the rooster left, along with the cow and two horses.

They had to keep those animals if they wanted milk and eggs and a mode of travel this winter.

Since Naomi's father's accident two years earlier, things on the farm had gone from bad to worse. It had come to the point that fresh food was getting quite scarce.

Over time, they'd had to sell their four mules and the other cow to have money for the land taxes and for flour, lard, and a little meat. They had now resorted to eating from the vegetable garden kept behind the house.

There were no crops in the fields anymore. What they'd gotten had all been sold.

Naomi knew the money was dwindling and, so far, she'd had no luck in finding a job of some kind. Any kind.

With the holidays coming, though, she was confident that she'd find work as an extra maid. The rich families in Ithaca would be throwing big Christmas gatherings for their friends and families, and extra hands would be needed.

Of course, holiday parties were only a temporary fix for her family's plight. What was she to do in the way of work come February?

The idea of finding a man to marry intruded itself upon her thoughts, and she tried to put it out of her head. How could she find a man to marry her when she didn't even have a beau?

It was just the way things were for women. A woman needed a man to take care of her financially, and the more money the man in question had, the better off she would find her life to be.

Naomi knew better than to think she could lift herself and her parents out of poverty by selling herself in marriage to a rich man.

Her social standing would only offer her another dirt farmer like her pa — someone with a poor life, but a poor life that was a bit above her own. They would marry, have children and eke out a living, side by side, the way her parents had.

And, hopefully, when they became of the age her parents were now, they would have something more comfortable than the Danleys had. Something less harsh.

She stepped into the cozy, warm kitchen and her stomach rumbled and flipped over when she smelled the delicious supper her mother had prepared. She poured the milk into a clean, covered milk can, which stood in the cold corner of the pantry.



“Something smells delicious, Mama.” Naomi re-entered the kitchen and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, honey. Go wash up. I’m just about to put it on the table.”

Naomi left the kitchen in a hurry, nearly bumping into her father, who was on his way to the table. They both laughed and she told him she’d be right back and continued upstairs.

In her room, she poured water into the washbasin from the pitcher. She couldn’t help but notice her parents had been tense.

They were keeping something from her, and she could guess at what it was.

She splashed water on her face and dried it with a clean linen. Then she smoothed her hair, removed her dirtied apron, and headed back downstairs.

True to her word, Dorothy Danley had laid their meal out on the table — a loaf of fresh, warm bread, two pork chops, and what was left of the crock of baked beans they’d had the night before.

“Let us give thanks,” George Danley said.

When they’d finished saying grace, Dorothy slid the pork chops in Naomi’s direction. She spooned beans onto her daughter’s plate and put a thick slice of bread with lard next to it.

Her mother did the same with George’s plate. For herself, she’d reserved a couple tablespoons of beans, which she spooned over a thin slice of bread.

It didn't look like enough food for a child, much less a farm wife who'd been working hard since six o'clock that morning.

"Oh, Mama. I can't eat all of this. Will you help me and take my pork chop? My stomach has been sensitive today," Naomi said in her whiniest voice, hoping to sound convincing.

"I think beans and bread is all I can tolerate. The meat is too heavy," she insisted.

"Oh, well then, maybe your father would like it," Dorothy said with a smile.

Naomi narrowed her eyes at her father. She had to convey to him that her mother didn't have enough to eat.

He looked at Naomi strangely, as if he didn't know what she was getting at, but when she picked her piece of meat up with her fork and deposited it onto Dorothy's plate, he didn't say anything.

They ate with little conversation.

George was depressed, Naomi could tell. His injury prevented him from being in the saddle for more than two hours at a time, and that was pushing it.

Consequently, he was unable to go out on the farm every day, as the old injury would be exacerbated. He'd been working every other day for too long.

Hiring someone to work the land for them had been out of the question. Naomi and her mother kept the garden up all summer and had an ample amount of vegetables that they'd already canned and preserved, but they had nothing left to sell.

In spite of what they had, it didn't look like there'd be enough to carry the three of them all through the winter. And there was very little money to spend on supplementary food.

Naomi realized she couldn't wait for the start of the holiday parties to find work. She would need to go tomorrow and try to find something. Anything.

Of course, that something would involve domestic service, which ran the gamut of cleaning chamber pots to helping the lady of the house dress.

If Naomi could find a live-in position, she would have all her meals taken care of at the house she worked in. That would ensure her parents were well-fed for the winter.

Since the age of fifteen, Naomi had been picking up extra work as a domestic servant, but in the last two years, it had become increasingly difficult to find a steady position because she didn't want to live at her place of employment.

She preferred to live at home, but rich folks wanted their help on call at all times. That meant living on the premises.

The options for those living outside the home were limited, and Naomi was only called upon as a fill-in if someone was ill or extra help was needed.

When supper was through, Naomi told her mother she was feeling jittery and needed to work off her nervous energy.

"I'll clean up, Mama. You go sit with Pa in the parlor. Do you want a cup of tea?"

“That would be like Heaven on earth, my girl. Thank you.”

Naomi smiled and went about making tea for her parents, then took it to the parlor.

“Mama, Papa, I need to go into town tomorrow, early. If there’s anything I can pick up for you, just let me know.”

“You’re going into Ithaca? How nice. Why don’t you have lunch with one of your girlfriends, honey.”

“Oh, I might do that, Mama,” Naomi answered, as if that was indeed an option for her. There was no money to be squandered having restaurant lunches, but she played along as if their lives hadn’t irrevocably changed in the last two years.

“I’m letting you know I’ll be out now because, as I said, I’ll be dashing out right after breakfast.”

“Okay, honey.” Dorothy sipped her tea and smiled, while George already dozed in his chair by the fire.

Naomi wasn’t worried that her parents might ask her where she was going or why. Her parents respected her privacy and so, she would be able to go on job interviews the following day without them knowing.

It was a good thing, too. Naomi didn’t want to threaten the fragile pact with reality her mother seemed to have made. The woman went through the days as if tomorrow would be the lucky day in which all their financial woes would come to an end.

Naomi prayed that such a day would indeed come before too long.

The next day after breakfast, Naomi dressed in the better of her two skirts.

She had a dark blue one with a jacket to match and a brown one, also with a matching jacket. A vest in a brown, blue, and tan design could be worn with either ensemble.

The blue made for the nicer outfit.

There were four white shirtwaists hanging up, and she also possessed two dresses for work around the farm which she didn't keep in the armoire. Rounding out her wardrobe was her church dress which also doubled for festive occasions.

Most domestic positions supplied uniforms of black dresses with white aprons, and that was Naomi's hope for the job she intended to get.

The kind of job Naomi wanted least was a domestic position. But she had to do something to help her parents and, other than farm work, service was all she knew.

As it was, she felt like kicking herself for not looking for something sooner. But until her mother hadn't taken any meat for herself, Naomi hadn't been aware of just how bad their situation had gotten.

Being poor was one thing. Not having enough food was another. Naomi planned to find a serving position where she would live in, which meant she'd get room and board.

The board was most important. She wouldn't have her mother go

hungry for her.

Her hair was parted in the middle and pulled into a low bun at her neck. It was mid-September and still warm in the daytime and, after she was dressed, Naomi pinned her hat on.

She was as ready as ever. Her ensemble was simple, but clean and starched. She smiled at her reflection in the glass and went downstairs to say goodbye to her parents.

She would walk into town. It was only three miles away, but too far to let her parents know if she was hired on the spot. It was time to come clean and let them in on her plan.

“Mama, if I don’t show up for supper tonight, it means I got hired.”

“What do you mean, hired? Hired for what?”

“I’m going to look for a maid’s job, Mama.”

“A maid’s job? Why? You know you’ll have to live there. I’ll never see you. I remember the last domestic position you took.

“You’d come here on Sundays after church and barely make it through the meal without falling asleep. You were so tired. No, I won’t have it.

“I can’t have my girl working her fingers to the bone like that. You just stay here and help me if you want to clean,” Dorothy laughed, “I have plenty for you to do.”

“But we need money, Mama. I want to contribute to the household on a regular basis. It’s a necessity.”

“But do you really have to be a maid? There’s got to be something else you can do? What about taking in sewing? It’s a more genteel position.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking of what I can do to help out here. The general store, the dressmakers, even the saloons have enough employees.

“If the dressmakers don’t need help, a seamstress without a clientele or a reputation to speak of will be hard put to find clients.

“There’s just not a lot of work right now. Certainly, there’s not much extra work, except for the holiday parties.

“A lot of the people passing through town are staying for the winter and scooping up the odd jobs. I even asked at both hotels for work and they didn’t need anyone. In the summer, there’ll be work, but I need it now.

“If I don’t work as a maid, the only other thing I can think of — and I don’t like the idea one bit — is to answer an advertisement to be a mail-order bride.”

“A mail-order bride? Pshaw! I won’t hear of it. George!” Dorothy called for her husband to join them.

“Sh, sh, Mama. There’s no use in telling Papa, he’ll only get upset about it. Please don’t tell him, okay? Would you rather us have to sell the farm?”

“But I’ll never see you again if you run off to marry someone. Maybe your pa can talk some sense into you. I don’t want you going far away where I’ll never see you again.”

“You’ll see me again, Mama, don’t be so dramatic. Please! Marrying a well-off man will ensure that I’ll have money to send to you and Pa.”

The stakes were far better in answering an advertisement than in anything else she could do. She could find someone with a well-to-do life.

The West was full of men who’d made their fortunes. They weren’t afraid to marry women like Naomi... poor women.

Newly wealthy men out West didn’t think it would bring them down in the eyes of society to take on a wife from humble circumstances.

Many of those men had once been in the position Naomi was in. The West was a freer place, where pedigree wasn’t of the same level of importance as in the East.

“Do you actually think your pa is going to accept you... selling yourself in marriage, in order to help out on the farm? He won’t hear of it, and I won’t either. I mean it.”

“Why don’t we wait and see what happens today, okay? Maybe I’ll find something right in town.”

“I suppose I can’t stop you from looking in town now, can I? You’re a grown woman. I can’t believe my baby is twenty-two years old.”

“Your baby? Mama, you were younger than I am now when you gave birth to me.”

“It’s true. I felt so much older, though,” Dorothy sighed.



“Okay, Mama, give me a kiss and wish me luck. I have to get going. I want to get to as many houses between breakfast and supper as I can. I hope to be in town by nine o’clock.”

“All right, honey. If I don’t see you later, I’ll have a note from you tomorrow. Is that what you said?”

“Yes, okay. Bye, Pa,” Naomi called into the parlor and was out the front door. She hurried along the road that led to town. The walk would do her good.

She was angry. At everything and everyone.

She was angry that her mother hadn’t told her what dire straits the family was in. It was unfair of Dorothy to keep something so pertinent from her.

Their family had never been well-off, but there had been a few years when the farm was improving and the feed crop they sold was in great demand.

Then, a businessman from New York City had come to town and bought out five small farms that had been about to go into foreclosure. He’d had a meeting with George Danley, but George had refused to sell.

The man from New York had put in feed crops and sold them for less than George could afford to. Then, the taxes had to be paid.

Naomi seethed as she walked. It had been a downward spiral from there.

Now, she found herself in the position of most likely having to marry a complete stranger in order to take care of this year’s taxes.

And it angered her.

She didn't think it was fair she should have to move away and get married just because she was poor. But what else could she do?

If she couldn't find something today, she knew it was what she had to do.

She looked up, surprised she'd come the whole way. The outskirts of Ithaca were just ahead and when she got there, she ducked into a small shop that sold necessities for those just arriving into or leaving town.

She rifled through the newspapers. There was only one copy, but it was the current issue for September/October of *The Marriage Times*.

She paid for the periodical and stuffed it into her small carpetbag. Then she straightened her shoulders and headed for the first big house she saw.

Since she'd done domestic work in the past, Naomi knew to go to the back kitchen door to speak to the cook or the housekeeper, whoever was in charge. She knocked and was surprised when the door flew open.

"Well, it's about time you're here. The missus has been waiting since nine o'clock." The cook stuffed her escaping red curls up under her mop cap as she spoke.

"I'm sorry. Excuse me."

"Shush and get into the drawing room with you. She wants to talk to you now."

Naomi was pushed in the direction of two large, gleaming dark mahogany doors which were ajar.

A voice from the other side of them called out, “Are you there? Come in here so I can get a look at you.”

Naomi didn’t know what to do, so she walked into the room. The elderly lady that sat there eyed her up and down and demanded that she turn around in a circle.

“Hmm. You’re a bit on the thin side. Hmm. No worries. We can fatten you up. I don’t want the neighbors thinking I mistreat my help. Is that understood?”

Clearly, the woman had been expecting someone to interview.

“Yes, ma’am. Um...”

“Shhh. Let me look at you? Hmm. Do you have letters of introduction?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t.”

The lady of the house’s eyes opened wide. “You expect me to hire you without knowing anything about you? No, no, no. That is not how I do things.

“Katie Frances? Come and get this, this imposter out of here, will you?” She looked at Naomi once more. “You may wait in the hall.”

With that, she went back to her fancywork and Naomi backed out of the room and the house.

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